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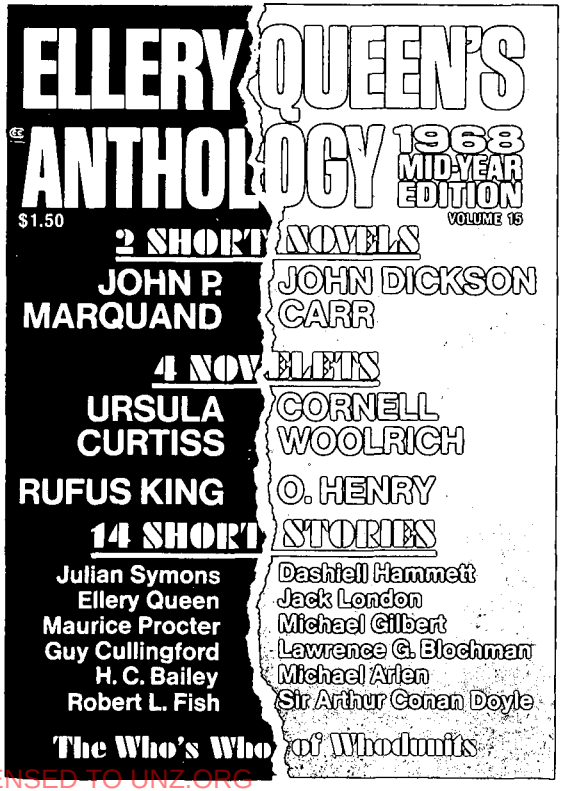

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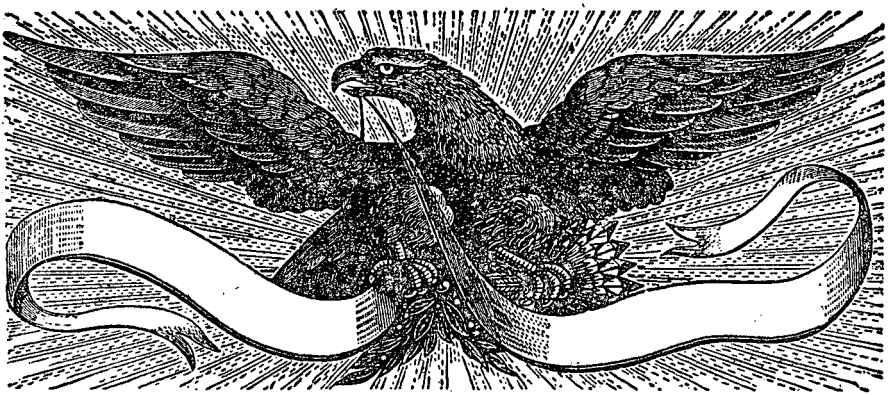

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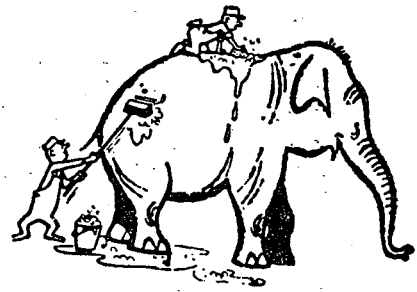

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PUBLISHER: *B. G. Davis* — EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 51, No. 6, Whole No. 295, JUNE, 1968. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at 60c a copy. Annual subscription $7.00 in U.S.A., and possessions and Canada; $8.00 in the Pan American Union; $8.00 in all other countries. Editorial and General Office, 505 Park Ave., New York, N. Y. 10022. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for subscriptions, and other mail items are to be sent to 505 Park Ave., New York, N. Y. 10022. Office of Publication — 10 Ferry St., Concord, N. H. 03301. Second-Class postage paid at Concord, N. H. *© 1968 by Davis Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A.* *Submission must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.*

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Winner of FIRST PRIZE *in the* MWA *contest*

PATRICIA McGERR

Here are the names of the winning authors and the titles of their prize-winning stories in the special Mystery Writers of America contest sponsored by *EQMM* last year:

First Prize
Patricia McGerr's *Match Point in Berlin*

Second Prizes
Miriam Allen deFord's *The Ptarmigan Knife*
James Cross's *A Matter of Probabilities*
Joe Gores's *File #3: The Pedretti Case*

In this issue we bring you the First Prize Winner—Patricia McGerr's *Match Point in Berlin*—a twisting, turning, throbbing novelet of spies and counterspies, with action happening so fast you won't be able to stop reading.

The protagonist in this new novelet is Miss McGerr's most famous character—Selena Mead. We asked the author to prepare a sort of "detective dossier" on Selena, and here is what her creator sent to us:

"Selena Mead was born a widow. The first story about her, published in *This Week Magazine* in October 1963, began with her husband's murder. He was knifed by an enemy agent on a dark street in Washington while on a mission for the small and secret (and mythical) branch of Security known as Section Q. By the story's end Selena had trapped his assassin, cleared a U.S. Senator of suspicion of treason, and become herself a link in the counterspy network.

"In succeeding stories she rescued a King, foiled a plot against the First Family, and checkmated subversive activities in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. Before long she was dubbed (by *The Wall Street Journal*) 'the female James Bond'—but there are fundamental differences. She is, so far as possible, nonviolent, preferring wit and wile to fist and gun, and her moral standards are high (particularly since her fan mail reveals a large following of teen-agers

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who want to be 'just like Selena'). Born to wealth and social status, she does her best work while dining at the White House, dancing at an Embassy, or flirting with a Prime Minister. Her mother is a collateral descendant of Robert E. Lee, her father a captain of industry and sometime ambassador. There were thirty live swans at her debut.

"She has, to date, been featured in two dozen short stories and one novel, all telling of new assignments. The novel, Is THERE A TRAITOR IN THE HOUSE?, contains a moment of retrospection when she looks back on eight happily married years and the time when it all began: 'On graduation she'd gone abroad . . . a final solitary pilgrimage before coming back for the autumn wedding to the well-bred pleasant young man of whom her parents so thoroughly approved. But at the end of that summer, one evening in Berlin, her path crossed Simon's. And for a few hours she was caught up in the danger that was, for him, a way of life. Caught up, never to break away'."

Patricia McGerr's First Prize story is the nightmare-come-real, until now untold, of that terrifying evening in Berlin . . .

MATCH POINT IN BERLIN

by PATRICIA McGERR

SELENA SAT IN THE RESTAURANT AT Templehof Airport and decided to treat herself to a fancy pastry as her last memento of Berlin. The delicately flaked dough with its rich topping of whipped cream seemed somehow to symbolize the life to which she was returning. In June she had been graduated from Vassar—Class of '55. In October she was to be married. The summer's tour of Europe had been a final fling before settling down with the well-bred pleasant young man of whom her parents so thoroughly approved. They would slide into the social rounds of Washington's bright younger set whose major anxiety was the proper chilling of wines and the harmonious blending of dinner guests. Life with Raymond would be a good life, easy, comfortable, sheltered. And oh, so unexciting.

Stop it! She pulled herself back from the edge of melancholy. It's the letdown of being at journey's end. Plus perhaps a slight case of pre-bridal jitters. She checked her watch: 7:40. They had told her when she arrived at the airport for the New York flight that there would be about an hour's delay in

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takeoff. So there were twenty minutes left to drink her coffee, eat her pastry, and say goodbye to adventure.

Her eyes went to the entryway where a young man was just coming in. Tall, lean-faced, rangy, he wasn't exactly awkward, yet his arms and legs seemed to move on not quite the same wave length. So different from Raymond, she thought involuntarily, with his neat precise movements, all so coordinated and so easy to classify. The stranger's face was serious, even set; yet seeing the deep clefts in each cheek she felt she knew how he would look when he smiled.

I'd like to know him, she told herself, and then, as his eyes seemed about to meet hers, she turned sharply away, with a vague sense of disloyalty to Raymond. She fixed her gaze on the pastry tray, which was only a few tables away, studying it as if all her hope of heaven depended on a right choice between Schillerlocken and Buttercremetorte. So intense was her concentration that she didn't see the small shabby man until he was beside her.

"Excuse, fraulein." His English was accented but fluent. "You are American, no?" The question was rhetorical. He slid into the other chair as he spoke. It was only when he was seated that she became aware —from his short quick breaths, the whiteness of his knuckles as he gripped the table edge—that this was no ordinary encounter; not a pickup, not a beggar, not a peddler. This was a man under shattering tension, a man ripped apart by terror.

"Fraulein." He leaned close to her. "I must speak quickly. It is necessary they see me talk with American. I have a list. It is important. It belongs to the Party. And it is trusted to me to deliver to our leader. But they say I am not loyal. They say I will sell this list to the Americans. This is not true. I sell nothing. All I have—" his clenched fist beat against his heart "—all I am is for the Party. But one accused me and they do not let me explain. They come in the night to kill me before I can sell the list. It is the names of those who work for the Party, those who are true and those who betray us. You understand?"

"No." Selena shook her head.

"No matter. It is necessary only they see me talk to you and see me give you something. So long they know I have the list, they think only to kill me before I can sell it. They give me no time to talk, to explain. But when they think I have deliver it already, they will not be in so much hurry to kill me. They will wish to have me alive, to take me to the leader and tell what I have done. Then I can give to him the list and prove that I am always loyal. So please to put your hand on the table, fraulein."

Instinctively she obeyed and his hand moved with snakelike speed to place in hers a small oblong box.

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"Now put it quickly away," he ordered.

"But I—this list—I don't—"

"Quick, fraulein, bitte!" His tone was so urgent that she transferred the box to her purse and snapped it shut.

"Now is all right." His tension went out in a long slow breath. "They have seen. They think it is too late to stop me selling. They bring me now to the leader."

"But what have you given me? I don't want—"

"Nothing, fraulein. I give you nothing. The box with the list is here." He slapped his palm on his vest pocket. "When I go to the leader I give it to him and he knows Stanovski is loyal. What I give you is a box of matches, a box of matches only. But they will think it is the box with the list for long enough to save my life."

"But if it's so important—to both sides—and they think I have it—" He was rising to leave. She clutched his sleeve. "I mean, if they'd kill you for it, they might—"

"To you, fraulein, they can do nothing. With me it is different. Something happens on a dark street to me, one of their own people. I disappear, who cares? But you are American. You are here in the light with many people. Very soon you walk on your plane and then you are back in your own country. No one can hurt you. Besides in fifteen minutes, maybe less, I give the list to the leader and everyone knows you have nothing. Only a box of matches, fraulein. When I am gone you will use them to light your cigarettes and when you strike them you will remember that you have save a life." He stood, heels close together, and made a formal bow. "Wiedersehen, fraulein."

She watched him walk, almost jauntily, to the exit. Two men met him there and they exchanged greetings. To a casual observer it might have been a reunion of old friends. But there was something in the eyes of the other two, something in the way they ranged themselves on each side, so close that he might almost be lifted between them, that was like an icy finger on Selena's spine. The little man, she realized, was an enemy agent, carrying information valuable to the other side. Yet watching him, so small and helpless between his two allies, she felt glad that he still had his precious list, glad he would be able to prove himself "loyal."

The waitress approached and cut off her view of the door. She looked blankly at the tray that had seemed, only a few minutes ago, so enticing—the thick chocolate, the gooey pineapple, the vivid cherry-and-banana.

"No," she said vaguely. "No, thank you."

Somehow she had lost her taste for pastry.

Instead she poured her second cup of coffee, reached into her

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purse for the cigarette that would, she hoped, be a sedative for her quaking nerves. Ordinarily the waiter would have been quick to light it, but now he was deep in argument with the pastry girl, presumably trying to explain why he had summoned her to serve cake to a lady who wanted none.

So Selena fumbled for and found her newest acquisition. It was, as the little man said, a matchbox, just like the other boxes she had been buying for ten pfennigs all through Germany. She pushed it open and reached for a match.

But there were none. The box was empty. No, not empty. Only empty of matches. The panel slid a little way and stuck. And what made it stick was a thin strip of microfilm. The list! Stanovski's list! In his fear and agitation he had reached into the wrong pocket, passed over the wrong box. Now he had nothing to give his leader, no way to prove his loyalty. He had delivered the list to an American. Who would ever believe he had done it by mistake? Or believing, make any differentiation between error and betrayal? The grim faces of his companions rose freezingly before her. And the leader, she thought, would be grimmer still. Unhappy little man.

But now—she pressed the box shut, thrust it back into her purse, and suddenly had sympathy only for herself. Now I have the list. I'm marked with having it. It was delivered to me with almost a blare of trumpets. And if those men were sent to take their colleague, dead or alive, to the leader, are there not others charged with—at any cost—recovering this filmstrip?

She glanced around the restaurant. It was full of people and none of them was looking at her. Yet it seemed—was it only her imagination?—that many eyes had dropped, turned aside, just before she looked their way. She stared through the distant glass wall into the dark. Out there was the runway down which her plane would come. She strained toward it, toward the safety of that cabin rising into the sky.

The American Embassy, she thought. No, that's in Bonn. In Berlin it's the United States Mission. They would want this list. I must take it to them. But to get up from the table, find a telephone, try to locate someone at the Mission and explain what she had—it was too much for her. You're safe here, Stanovski had said. Here there was light, there were people, and she couldn't bring herself to leave it for the unknown that might be just outside the door. I can't be a heroine, she decided. My best hope is to stay in this public place until my plane is announced. I'll turn the film over to the authorities when I'm safely in New York.

So Selena sat and sipped her coffee and planned to thrust herself into the very center of the group

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that would move through the exit to the field and onto the plane.

At last it came—the announcement for which she was waiting. "Achtung," said the loudspeaker and went on in German of which she caught the names of Hamburg, London, and New York, so she knew it was her flight being reported. But as the announcement continued, a dismayed murmuring rose from the people who understood it. More delay, Selena realized, and wondered how she could get through another half hour or more with the matchbox hotter in her purse than if all its original contents had been ablaze.

"Attention," said the loudspeaker and she leaned forward to concentrate on the English translation. With each word her heart sank nearer to despair. Unfavorable weather conditions. Flight canceled. No more planes would take off from Berlin that night.

Around her the murmurs were tinged with irritation, anger, disgust. But Selena felt only numbness, as if nightmare had taken hold and none of this could be real. There was no safe cabin to walk to, no plane to lift her high above danger. There was only darkness and fog and evil.

Around her people gathered up their wraps and bags, preparatory to returning to their homes and hotels for the night. These were people who would be inconvenienced, missing business appointments or social engagements, because of the canceled flight.

But I—Selena pressed her purse tightly against her stomach—I have no urgent appointments. An overnight delay will make no great difference. I have nothing to lose—nothing but my life.

A few people lingered to finish their coffee or dessert. Soon they would leave. The restaurant would close. The airport would be deserted. Then what would she do? Find a cab, go to a hotel, spend the night in Berlin. How far, she wondered almost with detachment, will I get? Will they wait till I'm well away from the airport or will it happen as soon as I step into the cab? When? And how?

If she could get to the airport authorities, tell them her story, perhaps they could protect her. But the reservation desk seemed an impossible distance away. Beyond the restaurant entry was a smaller room with tables and chairs in it and a place to check coats and hats. There might be people in this smaller room and there might not. Beyond the room was a broad expanse of corridor with doors opening from it that led—she didn't know where. To pass alone through all that empty space—no, it wasn't possible.

But there must be some way. Some help. All these people. I can't let them get away. If only I could speak a little of the language. Yet even if I did, how would I choose

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between a German who might befriend me and one of those who are waiting for me? How can I know whom to trust?

Once more she surveyed the restaurant. How, she asked herself, do you recognize an American? It's unfair, when everyone can tell I'm one, that I can't work it in reverse. In spy novels we give ourselves away by switching the fork from left hand to right after cutting our meat. But no one here is eating meat. And I've never heard of a distinctively American way of stirring coffee.

Behind her, at a table nearby but out of range of her vision, a voice was raised to ask the waiter for the check. A clipped British voice with an imperious accent that assumed everyone everywhere must speak his language. An Englishman! She twisted in her chair till she could see him. A comfortable, middle-aged, Colonel Blimp-type Englishman. So it's all right. I'll tell him what's happened, he'll take me to the American consul and—but no.

Before she moved she tried to compose her thoughts. Better not run to him with a wild tale of spies. He'll think I'm mad and it will give me completely away to whoever's watching. Instead I'll go calmly to his table and say that I'm alone in Berlin and need an escort back to my hotel. Then, once we're safely away from the airport, I'll tell him the story.

She rose and held tightly to the chair to steady herself till the weakness was gone from her knees. Then she turned. Colonel Blimp was counting Deutchesmarks into the waiter's palm. But she hardly noticed the Englishman. For at the table behind and on the other side of hers was the young man she had seen earlier. And he was reading the European edition of the *New York Herald Tribune*. Reading the comics! So he was certainly an American. She wanted to shout the word aloud like a hymn. An American!

She almost ran to his table and the speech she had prepared for the Englishman tumbled from her lips.

"I'm an American and my flight home's been cancelled. I'm all alone in Berlin and I—"

"Not any more you're not alone," he broke in cheerfully. "You're with Simon Mead now and there's not a better handler of damsels-in-distress on the whole continent than Simon Mead—especially when they're cuddly green-eyed damsels with raven distresses. Sit down, we'll have a little drink and then fly out under our own power."

She took the chair he pushed out, but she felt a stabbing disappointment. When he came in, she thought, he looked so sturdy, so competent, so able to cope with any emergency. Why must he turn out to be so hearty and clownish?

"I don't want a drink," she said. "I don't want to stay here."

"Sure you don't," he agreed.

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"Nothing deader than an airport when the fog closes in. The fun and games all went thataway. So we'll go after them. I'll tell you where we're going to start." His voice dropped to a confidential whisper as if they were already alone in a candlelit room. "The Zigeuner Keller of the Haus Wien. Know what that means? The gypsy cellar of the Vienna café. And it lives up to its name. Music that will break your heart and goulash that will ruin your stomach. Then from there—"

"I don't want to go to a night club," she protested. "I thought maybe you could take me some place quiet and—"

"Ah!" His breath came out on a long rollicking note and ended in a whistle. "Know something, kiddo, I had you pegged all wrong. I was sitting here thinking you were my kind of dish, but I said to myself, uh-hunh, that's an icicle, go up and you'll get the old refrigerator door smack in your face. So I sit tight and you come to me. That's the kind of mistake I like to make."

"But I—"

"Don't worry, kiddo, if it's a quiet time you want, Mrs. Mead's boy Simon is for you. I've a nice cozy room, they'll send up some champagne, and we'll have ourselves a ball. Maybe you know my hotel?" Again his voice was caressingly low. "The Am Zoo. Funny name, huh? Means it's by the zoo. So you can listen to the lions roar outside and the wolf purr inside. How about that?" A grin creased his face, just the way she'd expected it would, but the sight gave her no satisfaction.

He rose and with a hand under her arm helped her from her seat and started toward the door. Unhappily, she let herself be drawn along, though only the memory of the perilous matchbox in her bag kept her from pulling away from him. His conversation, as they threaded their way through the other tables, continued to be loud, jovial, suggestive. But as they passed the entry there was a sudden change. His grin faded, his voice dropped, and there was left no trace of heartiness.

"I'll take them off your hands now," he said briskly. "Our friend's matches."

"You—" She pulled her arm free. So he was one of Them. Or one of Us. In that instant she didn't care which. All that mattered was that he wanted the list and she wanted to get rid of it. The film had been forced on her. She had no responsibility for it, no ability to keep it safe. Let this man have it. And, more important, let everyone know he had it.

She half turned back into the restaurant. Look at me, she wanted to shout. Whoever you are, wherever you are, look at me. She fumbled in her purse, held the little box conspicuously aloft, and jabbed it toward her companion. See that. It

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was half a prayer. You must have seen that. I've given it away. I don't have it any more.

Her palm met his briefly as she pressed the box into it. He looked a little startled at the suddenness of her move but accepted the box and reached again for her arm.

"No," she said inanely. "I haven't finished my coffee. You go on. I'll stay here."

"Yeah?" He frowned, shrugged, was again the falsely jolly pickup. "Okay, this party was your idea, so you can call it off."

He swaggered away from her and disappeared into the room beyond. She walked back to her table, past Colonel Blimp who was stuffing his wallet into his pocket while he moved toward the exit. No need to speak to him now, she thought. I'm free of the list, free of danger. Yet the relief she should have felt was somehow missing.

The waiter hurried forward with her forgotten check. As she paid it and waited for her change, there was a commotion in the corridor, the sound of running feet and rising voices. No, she denied her fears. No, it's nothing to do with me. I can't go out there. Whatever's happening, I must stay here. But she ran, stumbling in her haste, to the door, past the checkroom, into the lobby where a chattering crowd had collected.

"What is it?" She seized the arm of the nearest man. "What's happened?"

He answered with a flow of German and she moved frantically on. Finally, near the outside exit, she found a woman who could speak English.

"The young man—the American—he has attack—a fainting fit. He falls and hits his head on the hard floor. But he has good luck that his friend is doctor. He takes him now to hospital."

"No!" Selena's agonized cry brought her only the curious glances of the nearest spectators. She pushed through them till she was at the door and could look out the glass into an open cab where Simon Mead's long form, limp now, his head dangling, was supported by a black-coated stranger.

"Stop!" She hurled herself past the obstructing bodies, out onto the sidewalk. "That's not a doctor. He has no friend."

But the cab was already moving and gaining speed. The crowd was breaking up, its moment of drama ended, returning to its own concerns.

"Stop them," she said again without much hope and no one paid any attention. The cab reached the first bend in the drive, would soon be out of sight.

I did this, she told herself, and the thought was a jagged wound. With my flaunting of the matchbox, my shoving it into his hand, I marked him for Them. Because I was afraid, I delivered him into their hands, sent him to—She

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couldn't finish the thought. She had to act.

Another car was at the curb, with an elderly couple inside giving instructions to a uniformed chauffeur. Selena pulled open the door, scrambled in, and almost onto the astonished owner's lap.

"Follow them!" The words took most of her remaining strength. "Follow that cab."

The man, his wife, and their driver stared at her in bewilderment. They say all Europe is corrupted with our American gangster movies, she thought bitterly, so that's a phrase they ought to understand. But they looked at her blankly, waiting courteously for some explanation of this wild American intrusion. And now the cab had vanished into the night. Only its license number, memorized without conscious volition, remained imprinted on her brain. Simon Mead was gone, he was helpless, and there was nothing more she could do.

But there must be. Her mind went back to those few minutes at his table. He had acted so well the part of brainless masher. He had talked a lot of nonsense. But he was there with a purpose, so his talk must have had a purpose too. He had told her his name, repeated it several times so she was sure to remember. And he had told her—what else? The name of his hotel.

Again his voice came back and the lowering of its tone took on new significance. He was giving her information that no one else should hear, telling her where help might be found. But she, filled with her own fears, had not listened carefully. Now she tried vainly to remember. It was her only hope. His only hope. She had to recall the hotel name. Something—yes, something about wolves and lions.

"Take me," she said to the driver, "to the zoo."

He looked past her at his employer. She turned to the old man.

"A hotel," she begged, "near the zoo." She tried various combinations. "Zoo Hotel? Hotel Zoo?"

"Hotel Am Zoo?" The woman supplied the name and Selena nodded gratefully.

"Hotel Am Zoo," she repeated. "Oh, hurry, please!"

The man and woman looked at her, spoke gently to each other. They could see she was in trouble, perhaps ill, certainly hysterical. Short of physical ejection, there was no way to get rid of her. That must have been their conclusion, for the man turned at last to the driver and spoke a command that contained the words "Hotel Am Zoo" and Selena relaxed a little as the car got under way.

But only for a moment. Where was Simon now? What were they doing to him? Would they take the list and let him go? Or would they— Again her mind veered from inevitable conclusion. She sat on the edge of the seat and clenched

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her hands till the nails bit into the palms and tried to believe that it was not too late, that there was rescue for Simon at the end of her journey.

They rode through dark streets, narrow streets, and finally merged on the broad brightly lighted Kurfurstendamm. The car slowed, came to a halt, and she saw with glimmering hope the lettering of the Hotel Am Zoo marquee. She pressed the woman's hand, murmured a breathless "Thank you," and was out of the car before the chauffeur was halfway round to open the door. In an instant she was in the lobby, almost shouting Simon's name to the man behind the desk.

"Mr. Mead is not in," the clerk told her. "You wish to leave a message?"

"No, I—" She tried to calm herself, to collect her thoughts. "Is there someone here—someone who knows him—that I could talk to?"

"There is Mr. Mead's friend, Mr. Hartman. You wish to see Mr. Hartman?"

"Yes, please. And hurry."

With what seemed to her maddening slowness he turned to the switchboard operator. After minutes that might have been hours a stocky young man with a crew cut came toward her.

"Bill Hartman," he announced himself. "You looking for Simon? He ought to be back in a few minutes. If you'll come with me—"

"No, they've taken him away. He's in danger. He—"

"This way." Firmly he took her arm and propelled her to the short flight of stairs that led to the hotel's lounge.

"There's no time to lose," she insisted. "You've got to get help, find him—"

"Of course," he agreed soberly. "But first I have to know what's happened."

The lounge was a railed balcony that looked down on the lobby, its only occupant a man glancing impatiently at his watch. Bill Hartman took her to the back into a small glass-enclosed room to which tree-like plants in large pots gave the appearance of a conservatory. He put her into a chair and took one close beside her.

"Now," he said, "tell me what you know and then I'll know what to do."

The authority of his voice and eyes gave her reassurance. She took a deep breath and told him quickly but fully about events at the airport from Stanovski's appearance at her table to Simon's unconscious exit. She held back only one detail—the flourish with which she had passed over the matchbox. To admit her cowardice, to expose to his friend her betrayal of Simon, was beyond her strength.

"You're sure," he said when she finished, "of the license number?"

"Very sure. Will it help?"

"It's good," he said, "that they

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started with the letters KB. That means a West Berlin registration and makes it less likely that Simon's been taken to the Soviet Zone." He was on his feet, looking down at her thoughtfully. "Now about you. I ought to take you some place where you'll be guarded, out of—"

"No!" she said vehemently. "Don't waste time. They know I gave him the matchbox. No one's interested in me now."

"I suppose that's true." He frowned, came to a decision. "All right, stay here. It should be as safe a place as any. Don't move from this spot until either Simon or I come back for you."

She watched through the glass of her shelter as he hurried down the steps, through the lobby, out of the hotel. Then she sank deeper into her chair and tried to tell herself that it was going to be all right. But there was no solace in her thoughts. Berlin was a huge city filled with hiding places and hostile forces. What could Bill Hartman or a dozen Bill Hartmans do to find one cab or one man in all that dark expanse? Again she was pervaded with a sense of guilt, a yearning to go back beyond that moment when her only desire had been to shift her danger to someone else.

Simon wanted the list, she told herself. He had asked for it. He was at the airport to get it. Yet she could not escape the belief that if she had made a less public presentation, had stayed beside him, the end might have been different. How he must despise me! I can't bear to face him. Yet she knew that to face him was the one thing above all else that she wanted. Only let him come back, she prayed. What he thinks of me doesn't matter. Only let him be safe.

A page came up the steps and gave a message to the man in the lounge. The man scowled, looked again at his watch, and rose to leave. Selena reached into her purse for cigarettes and matches. She put a cigarette between her lips, but the page was behind her, lighter extended, before she could take out a match. Inhaling deeply, she watched the man go down the stairs and the boy follow him.

She tried to make her mind a blank, to fill it only with the action in the lobby below, the movement of clerks and porters, the comings and goings of the guests. The next man to enter was, though she could not see his face, a familiar figure. The airport's Colonel Blimp. How different things might have been if she had spoken to him instead of Simon.

The Englishman stopped for a few moments at the desk, took a quick look around, and then, nimbly for a fat man, climbed the steps. He crossed the empty lounge and entered Selena's enclosure.

"My dear." He stood beside her chair, smiling down at her. "It's good to see you. I hoped that I might find you here."

"You—" She looked up at him, puzzled. "I don't think—"

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"I told the porter that I had come to meet my niece and described you. He sent me up here. Very convenient." He lowered himself into the next chair, pulled it closer to hers. "Now to business."

"I don't understand—"

"Please." He held up a plump well-manicured hand. "My time is too valuable to spend on games. You know why I am here. You have something that belongs to us. I have come for it. The matchbox, if you please."

"You're not an Englishman at all."

"It's a nationality," he said, "that I can counterfeit with great success. Very helpful in this business."

"Then you—you're a spy."

"We have the same trade, my dear. Only we work on opposite sides of the street. But I did not come to talk shop. Pease return our property."

"I don't have it. I gave it away. You must have seen—"

"Yes, I saw. You made very certain that it was seen." He smiled at her and her cheeks flamed at the reminder. "You're a very clever girl. And you look so frivolous. Perhaps that is why you are valuable. Stanovski said that you were no one, that he had chosen you only because you were the first American he saw and he had given the list to you by mistake. At first we believed him. But no matter."

The shrug with which he dismissed Stanovski was casual, his smile still amiable. "He will bother us no longer with his lies. But you, my dear, I must admire your acting. You seemed so anxious to be rid of the matchbox, so uninterested in its contents. It was brilliant the way you used the young American as decoy to throw us off your trail and onto his."

The young American. Of all the man had said, Selena's attention focused on that one phrase.

"The young American—where is he? What have you done with him?"

"So now you grow concerned for your dupe." He chuckled. "A little late, is it not? But then you are like me, ruthless when there is a job to do. The innocent must be used and cast aside. If they suffer—well, it teaches them the length of our arm."

"What did you do to him?"

"An oafish tourist. They should he? What have you done with him?" not allowed to wander loose and get in the way of serious business."

"But he—is he—"

"When I found that he was nothing, only a fool, I could not waste more time on him. We searched and found that you had given him a box of matches. Real matches. That was brilliant, my dear. But fortunately, though I was deceived, I was not entirely sleeping. I left someone at the airport to see where you went and I was able to follow. Now I will take the box—Stanovski's box. The one with our list."

He extended his palm confidently and Selena's hand closed tightly over the box she still held, the box

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she had not needed to open because the page had lighted her cigarette. It's not possible, she told herself. It can't be that the little man and I made the same mistake! He had intended to give her the wrong box but had handed her the right one. She, meaning to pass along the right one, had given Simon the wrong one. So now she still had the film, the list that both sides were so desperately seeking.

"You hesitate, my dear?" The fat man said cheerfully. "Surely you don't think I would come to you without a means of persuasion."

His hand dipped into his pocket and brought out a flat dark piece of wood. His thumb pressed a lever and three inches of narrow finely edged steel shot out. "If you have ideas about calling for help, let me tell you that it would take less than five seconds for this to slide between your ribs and into your heart. Then I would need only to summon a porter to help me carry my ailing niece to a taxi."

"You couldn't—you'd be stopped—you wouldn't—"

"Do you wish to put me to the test?" He switched the blade back into its case, held it close to her side. She shrank a little away, shaking her head without speaking. The cigarette dropped from her fingers. He picked it up and crushed it out neatly in the ashtray on the table in front of them.

"You're very wise," he approved. "Perhaps I'm bluffing, but in my trade you don't last long unless you're ready to follow through on a bluff. Now you will give me the matchbox."

"I—" Her throat was so dry she could hardly force the words. She closed her eyes and tried hard to swallow. This is what you wanted, she told herself. To be rid of the list, to be free of involvement. All you have to do is hand it to this man and it will all be over. Otherwise—

"I don't have it," she said.

"Don't be foolish." For the first time there was a snarl in his voice. "I know you have it. One way or another I'll get it from you. It will be pleasanter if you cooperate."

Yes, don't be foolish, one part of her was saying. You can't save the list, all you can do is get hurt. Give it to him before he has to use force. But her will was saying an irrevocable no. Maybe she was a coward, maybe at the airport she had been ready to save herself at any cost, but she wouldn't act like that again.

Simon Mead had risked his life for this list. She couldn't now surrender it tamely. When he came back—if he came back—at least she wouldn't have to tell him that she had given it up without a fight. The knife case was hard against her side. All right, she wanted to shout wildly. You have me, but you still don't have your list.

"Here." She thrust her purse at him. "Look for it yourself."

He opened the bag and dumped its contents on the table. She took

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advantage of this distraction to put the hand that was farthest from him, the one that held the matchbox, over the side of her chair till her fingers touched the soft earth of a potted plant. Showing no haste that might betray her, she dug a hole, buried the box, smoothed the surface of the soil.

"You see," she taunted as he probed the empty purse for hidden pockets. "I really don't have it."

"You don't have it in your bag," he amended. He swept the jumbled assortment back in and snapped the clasp. "It seems we must make a more thorough search than is proper for a hotel lounge. I must ask you to come with me."

He rose, fingering the knife with its unmistakable message. It's not too late, she thought. I could still give him the box and let him go away without me. Instead, she pressed hard against the chair, forcing herself to her feet. Only one thing seemed necessary—to get him away from the vicinity of the matchbox, away from this hotel before Simon came back to reveal his link with her.

They walked together down the steps. His hand was beneath her elbow, giving her chivalrous support. And the knife was in his hand.

"Your aunt will be pleased that I found you," he said as they passed the desk clerk. "She was afraid you might have left Berlin without seeing her again."

They walked out to the street. Kurfurstendamm was still as colorful, still as gay as the night before. Then she had been part of the gayety. Now she looked hopelessly at the milling throng on the sidewalk, the groups sipping drinks at the outdoor café, and wondered if she would ever be one of them again. A cab was waiting at the curb. Her companion helped her into it, seated himself at her side, then banged the door.

"The young lady is not being sensible, Josef," he told the driver. "She wishes to make us work to recover our property. You know where to take her."

Josef nodded, swung the car away from the curb, out into the traffic.

"I am sensible," Selena protested. "If I had it I'd give it to you. I know you'd find it anyway. So it would be plain silly to try to keep it hidden."

"Extremely silly," he agreed. "But I encounter many silly people. However, if you wish to change your mind and give me the list it will improve your situation. You must realize that you are now quite beyond help."

"I do realize it. And if I had the box I would give it to you. But I swear I don't have it. I—I gave it away."

"Really? To whom?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Ah, but you can. I think you'll find that there's nothing you can't tell me, after we've had a little time together. I told you my time is valuable, but I'll spend as much of it

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with you as is necessary. As for you, you have plenty of time—the rest of your life, in fact. Tell me, Josef." He leaned forward. "You've had experience with Americans. How long will it take to persuade our young friend to tell us everything we want to know."

"They're soft," the driver said contemptuously. "Ten minutes, if you're in a hurry."

"Ten minutes." He looked at her with lips thrust out, eyes narrowed speculatively. "Would you care to bet it takes longer?"

"No, I—" She pressed her hands together, strove for control. "I expect you can make me tell you everything I know. But I don't know anything. My orders were to go to the airport where a man would give me a matchbox. I was to take it to the Hotel Am Zoo and someone would meet me in the lobby and take it from me. I did as I was told and that's all I know."

"And the person who took it from you. Who was that?"

"I don't know. I really don't." Draw them away from Bill Hartman, her mind warned, in case they learn that you spoke with him. "It was a woman. A woman I'd never seen before. She gave me the password and I gave her the matchbox. There was no need for me to know any more about her."

"Hmm." He rubbed his chin. "What do you think, Josef?"

"Could be," the driver answered. "They don't trust each other either."

"We'll see," the fat man said. "If you stick to your story through the next few hours, we my begin to believe it."

He patted her hand as if he were in fact an affectionate uncle and she felt a deep inner squirming. Ten minutes, Josef had said. Would it take less time or more? She had no standards by which to measure her own endurance and Josef was evidently an authority. She might as well take his word for it that in ten minutes she'd blurt out everything about Simon and Bill and send them back to the Am Zoo to dig the list out of the dirt. She'd been given a second chance to be brave and she was going to fail more dismally than the first.

"Please—" She took a deep breath, gathering all her strength. "I know I can't hold out against you. So —I'm ready now to tell you the truth."

"Ah." The man beside her let out his breath in a slow murmur and in the front seat Josef's husky chuckle showed satisfaction at finding an American even softer than his estimate.

"I—" She spoke slowly, choosing her words with care. "It's true what I told you, about them not giving me any more information than I needed and my not knowing who any of the other people are. But when they didn't know I was still there, I overheard something."

"Yes?" he prompted. "You overheard?"

"The woman I gave the matchbox

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to was to go to a café. She was to stay there from ten o'clock until eleven and a man would come, say the password, and take the box."

"The name of the café?"

"If I tell you, if I point out the woman to you, will you let me go?"

"Your life in exchange for our list? It may be a good bargain. We'll discuss it when the list is in my hand. Quickly now, the name of the café."

Quickly, her mind echoed, quickly, quickly. But she could not speed up her memory. Twice Simon had lowered his voice. Once it was to mention his hotel and she had found Bill Hartman there. Surely the other time was also significant, a signpost to a place of refuge. She *must* remember what he said.

"It's a place I never heard of." She turned to her companion for help. "A strange name—I think it was Hungarian. Or maybe Viennese. There was something—yes, about a cellar. And gypsy music."

"Gypsy cellar," he suggested "The Zigeuner Keller of the Haus Wien?"

"Yes, oh, yes." She almost hugged him in her relief. "That's the place."

"All right, Josef, get us there fast." The car swerved round a corner, gathered speed. "We must be there before ten, before our list changes hands again. You've taken us on a roundabout chase, my dear. The Zigeuner Keller is almost next door to the Am Zoo."

"I didn't know that. I told you I only heard of it by accident."

"For your sake," he said softly, "I hope you've told me the truth. If this is a trick to gain time or to get yourself back among people, I'm afraid you'll deeply regret it. A crowded restaurant is no safer for you than this car. Remember how easily I took you out of the hotel? And people who waste my time have a very bad effect on my temper."

"It's not a waste of time," she breathed.

The car, once again on Berlin's main street, drew up in front of a vividly decorated building of gray stone.

"Wait for us, Josef," the fat man said, and helped Selena out of the car.

He kept her arm as they approached the building and continued to hold it as they descended the steep stairs that led to the dimly lit cellar.

"Simon Mead," she muttered as the uniformed doorman bowed them in.

"Eh?" The fat man frowned at her. "What's that?"

"He told me his name," she answered. "The American at the airport." They were beside the cashier. The headwaiter rushed forward with elaborate welcome. "I think it was—" she raised her voice a little "—Simon Mead."

The headwaiter, with sure professional instinct, greeted them in English, offered them a choice of tables in the three-quarter-filled dining room.

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"We're meeting friends," the man told him. "We'll just walk round the room and see if they're here yet."

They made a slow tour of the cellar, inspecting the animated couples, the family groups. Passing a cluster of waiters near the raised platform on which the orchestra was temporarily at rest, she spoke again.

"Yes," she said, "I'm sure he called himself Simon Mead."

"Still worrying about that tourist," her escort grumbled. "Get your mind on finding the woman for me or you'll have more personal worries than that."

They completed the circuit. He selected a booth near the far wall from which the entrance was visible and sat down close beside her.

"So," he said, "we are ahead of her. That is good. Unless she is not coming. That will be most unfortunate for you."

"I only told you what I heard. The arrangement was for her to be here. But that may have been changed. They may have made a different plan."

"Let us hope not, my dear," he said gently. "Let us both hope not."

The maroon-coated waiter was beside them with menus.

"Cognac," the fat man said. "And you, my dear? Do you wish to eat something?"

"Oh, no, nothing."

"Cognac," he repeated. "And mocha for the fraulein."

The waiter took the menus, scurried away.

"Now," he commanded, "keep close watch. We should not like to miss our friend."

Obediently she fixed her eyes on the entry. What now, she wondered desperately. How long will he wait before he knows that there is no woman, that I've lied to him? And when he knows it what will he do?

The waiter was back with their order. The fat man lifted the steaming pot, poured the thick strong coffee into her cup. Then he leaned back and took a connoisseur's sniff of his cognac. But he used only the hand farthest from her. The other remained on the bench, close to her side, so that she could always feel the curved wooden surface that masked the thin blade.

On the bandstand in front of her the orchestra finished their beers and went back to work. Violin, cello, piano, and marimba blended in a lilting tune with undertones of deep sadness. At the next table a boy reached for his girl's hand, gazed at her with misting eyes. Nearby, an exuberant diner waved his fork at the musicians in unison with the rhythm. From across the room came bursts of high-pitched laughter.

A short scream behind her brought her head around and she saw a spurt of flame. Fire! She felt a rising hope. If the restaurant's on fire there may be a chance for her to escape. But the blaze, she saw quickly, was only a row of skewered meat on which a waiter had poured brandy and touched a match. He

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waved it momentarily aloft before sliding it, still burning, onto a plate.

"Interesting," her companion murmured. "Have you ever seen a human torch, my dear?"

"No," she barely whispered.

"Much the same," he said. "Only of course we use gasoline. It's cheaper. Your woman should be getting here—if she's coming."

"Yes," she agreed. "She should be here soon."

She looked hopelessly round the room, from door to bandstand, past all the tables of happy people, to the back of the room where the white-capped heads of the chefs were visible above a screen. She looked at the screen, then looked away quickly, unable to believe her eyes. She glanced back and there was nothing there. Then a head bobbed up again —and it was Simon!

His eyes met hers, held them for an instant, and his hands, above the screen, moved apart in a sweeping gesture that told her to get away from the fat man, to free herself so that he could act.

There was no command she wanted to obey more. But there was no practical way to do it. Any movement on her part would only make her captor more alert. She wrenched her eyes from the kitchen, hoping that she had not given herself away. But her sudden tension could not miss being noticed.

"You have seen something?" the fat man said. "The woman—is she here?"

"I think so." Selena bit her lip, played for time. "Wait. Let me be sure."

Her eyes frenziedly roved the room, picked out a plump woman being seated by the waiter a few tables away. Her husband is probably checking his hat, Selena thought. But there may be time, just enough time, before he joins her.

"Yes, that's she." She pointed an unsteady finger. "In the red hat. She has the matchbox. But hurry. If she recognized me, sees us together, she may suspect—"

"Good." He slid his bulk from behind the table. "You've done well." He started away, turned back. "The password. What's the password?"

"Journey's end," she said.

He nodded soberly. In his trade, no doubt, he was used to odd phrases. He walked the few steps to the woman's table, looked down at her and spoke. She stared at him blankly and he spoke again, shouting to be heard above the music. The woman blinked, drew a little away in distaste, and he raised his voice just as the music came to a stop so that his repeated "Journey's end" boomed in the suddenly silent air.

"That's right." The answering voice was lower but audible to Selena's straining ears. "Your journey's ended, my friend."

Behind the fat man—close behind so that the weapon in the newcomer's pocket could press against the fat man's back—was Bill Hartman.

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And coming up to close the other flank was the cellist, incongruous in his yellow blouse and lavishly embroidered vest. The orchestra, a trio now, began a fresh tune, so Selena could hear no more of what was said. But she saw the fat man shrug his submission and move with the other two toward the door in a tableau reminiscent of her last view of Stanovski at the airport. This time, though, she felt no chill.

She didn't watch them all the way out. Suddenly Simon was at her side, his voice soft but imperative.

"You're all right?" She turned and his eyes seemed to be memorizing every detail of her face.

"Yes, I—I'm all right." She felt, now that it was finished, an overwhelming limpness. Then, as she looked at him, her strength came flooding back and she repeated with honesty and fervor, "I'm perfectly all right. But your friends—there's a man outside in a cab—"

"We've got him," Simon answered "Everything's under control now."

"But you—" She looked at him more closely, saw with a pang the red scar that ran from his hairline to an eyebrow. "You're hurt. What did they do to you?"

"It's nothing." He touched the mark lightly, laughed at her concern. "Don't worry about me. I'm indestructible. If you think this was a rough party, you should have been to the one in Hong Kong. Some day I'll tell you about it."

"Please do," she said eagerly, though her interest lay not in Hong Kong but in the promise contained in the words "some day."

"What happened tonight?" Selena went on. "How did you escape? At the airport you were unconscious. I saw them take you away." The memory came back with a vividness that made her shiver. "I thought they were going to kill you. And it was all my fault."

"Your fault?" His eyebrows lifted quizzically.

"I was so frightened." Fixing her eyes on her untouched coffee, she made her confession in a rush. "All I wanted was to save myself. That's why I made such a production of giving you the matchbox. I didn't think of the danger I was putting you into. The truth is, I didn't care. Not then, I didn't."

"As it turned out, that was the best job you could have done for me. Your big gesture made it easier for them to believe that you were using me, that I knew nothing about anything. By the time I came to, they'd finished their search and knew the list wasn't on me. All I had to do was go into my whiskey-brained playboy act till they were convinced they had the wrong man and you'd outsmarted them."

"And they let you go so easily?"

"An American tourist in the wrong hands can be a pretty hot potato. Let one disappear and it starts all kinds of big wheels in motion. Headlines, diplomatic notes, high-level conferences, low-level in-

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vestigations. Soviet-American relations are too delicate to put all that strain on them for no reason. And the way I looked to them, I was no reason. Worth nothing to either side. So they dumped me on the nearest street corner and got back to business."

"And you're—" She had to resist an impulse to run her fingers along the scar, to assure herself it was superficial. "You're all right?"

"Completely. The boy with the sandbag was careful to knock me out and nothing more. They wanted me in talking condition. But if you were worried about me, you can imagine how I've been kicking myself for throwing you to the wolves. Danger's my job. But you—"

He put his hand over hers, clasped it tightly as if to make sure she was really there. "Believe me, I thought you were well covered or I'd never have let them get the idea that you were the principal and I was your tool. The girl in the airport checkstand was working with us. Before they got to me, I had a chance to point you out and tell her to get you some guards. But you lit out too fast."

"I had to. When I saw them take you I had to try to find help."

"I know." He didn't release her hand. "I got a thousand-volt shock when I phoned the airport and found you'd gone out on the town alone. Then I got through to Hartman and he told me you'd showed up at the hotel. We raced back there and—" The pressure on her hand increased to the point of pain, but she didn't want it loosened. "The clerk said you'd left with your uncle. That's when I really panicked."

"But you found me," she soothed.

"Hartman kept his head," he continued. "He said since you got my message about the hotel, maybe the name of this place had stuck too. We checked and found an American girl had been dropping my name and we knew we'd found you. Lord knows how you managed it, though. What witchcraft did you use to persuade our fat friend to go nightclubbing on the busiest night of his life?"

"I told him the list was—oh, I'd almost forgotten. The list is important, isn't it?"

"Worth everything you've been through for it," he said soberly. "The Reds have a cute trick of planting agents on our side and then expecting a double-cross. So they run periodic checks on their own team. This is the first time we've been able to run down one of their checkups. It will give us a valuable fix on who belongs to whom."

"Then we'd better get it." She started to rise. "It's in a pot at the Am Zoo."

"In a what? You'll have to decode that for me."

"I buried it," she said. "The list. In one of the hotel plants. We'd better hurry. If it's so important—"

"The list is all right." He held her down. "It's locked in a safe and

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photocopies are on their way to the proper places."

"How did you get it? Did you look in the pot?"

"You gave it to me." He studied her face as if he thought she might be feverish. "At the airport. Remember?"

"That was the wrong box. I made a mistake—"

"No, you didn't. The box you gave me had the microfilm in it. But I got rid of it fast. I hoped I'd get back to town whole. But that was something no one could guarantee. And the important thing was to save the list. So I passed it on to my friend at the checkstand before the other crowd closed in. I had another matchbox in my pocket. That's what made them think you'd done a sleight-of-hand. And I let them think it because I was sure that by then you were in a safe place. I didn't know I was getting myself off the hook by getting you on it."

"Then I didn't have the list? What I buried was just my own box of matches?"

"Let me get this straight." He spoke slowly, wonderingly. "Porky came to you and said you still had his film. And you believed him?"

"Yes, of course. I had another matchbox. I thought it must be the right one."

"But you refused to give it to him. Did he have a gun?"

"No, a—" Her voice shook a little at the recollection. "A knife."

"So you let him take you away. You thought you had what he wanted. You knew that all you had to do was hand him the matchbox and he'd leave you alone. Yet you deliberately hid the box and walked out with him. That took courage."

"No," she said. "I don't have any courage. I was scared to death. I've been scared from the beginning. I wasn't being brave. I just got mad."

"Maybe that's what makes heroes. Getting mad at the right time."

"But it was all for nothing," she said dolefully. "I could just as well have given him the box and saved all this fuss."

"Then you wouldn't have led Porky into our net. He and his friend Josef make a very good night's catch."

"They're important?"

"Not the biggest frogs in the puddle," he admitted. "But they make a fair splash. When they start talking—and a man like Porky, who's in it strictly for profit, doesn't need much encouragement to talk—I think we'll get some interesting revelations. You've been a valuable auxiliary, Selena."

"You—" She looked up, surprised. "You know my name?"

"Got it from the airline. You're the only passenger who didn't check in to change your reservation. It's the only concrete fact I have about you, but I intend to start a collection." His face lightened with the grin that would never lose its power to quicken her pulse. "For us, the journey's just beginning."

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the *NEW* Inspector Maigret story by

GEORGES SIMENON

first publication in the United States

Observe the large gentleman in a heavy overcoat constantly puffing on his pipe as he sits close to the stove in a Rue Pigalle restaurant and nurses a coffee and a small calvados . . . It is Inspector Maigret hard at work with his own special technique—building up theories of what had happened and rejecting them, one after the other . . . a "classic" case, for reasons you will find out, and what might be called a "classic" deduction since it is based, in equal parts, on professional skill and on knowledge of people—Inspector Maigret's "long suits" . . .

INSPECTOR MAIGRET INVESTIGATES

by GEORGES SIMENON

ANYONE DROPPING IN AT MARINA'S would no doubt have been completely taken in. Lucien, the *patron*, in a thick fawn sweater which made him look shorter and broader, was fussing about with his bottles behind the bar, decanting, recorking, meticulously changing the washer on the tap. And if he was surly, that could be put down to the early hour and the weather.

It was a gray morning and colder than usual, a morning that might bring snow, a morning to linger in bed. It was just nine o'clock, and the Rue Pigalle was not very lively.

The chance customer would have wondered who that large gentleman was, sitting there in a thick overcoat and smoking his pipe, with his back against the stove, nursing a drink in his hand. He would certainly not have thought of Chief Inspector Maigret of Police Headquarters.

On the floor, dusting the table legs, he might have noticed a Breton servant girl, Julie, with a scared look, her face covered with freckles, and her clothes in rags.

In the Rue Pigalle restaurants, business rarely starts early. The clearing up had not been done. Dirty glasses were still standing about, and through the open door into the kitchen could be seen the *patronne*, Marina herself, looking more bedraggled and lopsided than her servant girl.

It was all rather peaceful and familiar. Two men were still sitting at the back table, but they didn't

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look so bad, although they were unshaven, and their suits were creased as if they had been up all night.

In fact, the casual customer would have seen nothing there but a small restaurant like any other, a restaurant with a regular clientele. Not very clean, admittedly, but not a bad place on a chilly morning.

He would, no doubt, have changed his mind if he had seen Maigret, suddenly noticing on the coat stand a camel's-hair coat belonging to one of the customers, advance on it, put his hand in the pockets, and draw out, without any sign of surprise, a compact American rubber truncheon. Even more so if he had heard the Inspector remark cheerfully, "Hey, Christiani —is that still my one?"

Half an hour earlier, as he was arriving at the Quai des Orfèvres, Maigret had been called to the telephone by someone who insisted on speaking to him personally. The caller was obviously trying to disguise his voice.

"Is that the Inspector himself? Well, then, there was quite a to-do last night at Marina's. If you took a little walk that way you'd perhaps meet your friend Christiani. And it might occur to you to ask him for news of Martino—you know, the youngster from Antibes whose brother's just been shipped off to Guiana?"

Five minutes later Maigret had found out from the exchange that the telephone call had come from a tobacconist's in the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. A quarter of an hour after he got out of a taxi at the corner of Rue Pigalle where, at that time, the gutters were heaped high with rubbish.

Maigret, who still knew nothing, would have sworn it was a serious matter—probably very serious, for informers like that rarely made up their stories.

The proof he had immediately, as he was walking slowly up the street. Almost opposite Marina's, and wedged surprisingly between the night clubs, he spotted a small bar like those in Auvergne. In this bar, on the lookout close to the window, the Inspector recognized two men, from Nice and Pepito, who were not usually to be met with so early, especially in such a place.

The next moment he was pushing open the door of the restaurant on the other side of the street. At the back he caught sight of Christiani in the company of a young recruit, René Lecœur, who was called the Bank Clerk, because he had worked in a bank at Marseilles.

In this kind of affair it is better not to be surprised by anything. Maigret tipped his hat to them all, just like any old regular coming in for a quick one. "How goes it, Lucien?"

That didn't prevent him noting that the cloth the *patron* held in his

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hands was trembling, or that the maid, straightening up suddenly, bumped her head on the table.

"Busy last night? Give me a coffee and a small calvados." Then, going into the kitchen, "How are you, Marina? I see someone broke your mirror for you over the bar."

He had noticed immediately that a mirror had been shattered by a revolver shot.

"That was done long ago," Lucien explained hurriedly. "Some fellow I didn't know. He'd just bought a gun, and didn't know it was loaded."

After that it had been slow going. Maigret had been there for more than a quarter of an hour, and not more than twenty remarks had been exchanged. While the maid went on with her work, and Lucien stayed at the bar, and Marina busied herself in the kitchen, the Inspector smoked his pipe, drank his calvados, went over from time to time to glance across at the bistro opposite, and walked back to the stove.

He knew the place like the back of his hand. Lucien, after having been in some trouble in Marseilles, had turned over a new leaf and opened up this little Montmartre restaurant, which he ran with his wife. The clientele was drawn mainly from former pals of his—gangsters, certainly, but most of them had mended their ways and become almost respectable.

Such was the case with Christiani, who ten years before, on being arrested, had not hesitated to cosh Maigret, and who now owned two brothels in Paris and another at Barcelonnette.

It was much the same with the men across the street, especially the Niçois, who owned two brothels, like Christiani, but, unfortunately, was in competition with him.

The Niçois was from the Marseilles gang, as they said in the trade, while Christiani was boss of the Corsicans.

"Tell me, has your little friend over the way been there long?"

"I don't bother about people like that," Christiani retorted scornfully.

"Maybe not. But he—he seems to me to be bothering about you. And, you know, if I didn't know you better, I'd think it was his presence in the little bistro that's preventing you from leaving."

A pause. A mouthful of calvados.

"Yes. I'd figure it out this way. Last night, for one reason or another, something bad must have happened! And since then the Niçois and Pepito have been waiting for you outside so that you've been obliged to sleep sitting up, the pair of you . . ." While speaking, he had approached the Bank Clerk and was now patting the creases in his jacket.

"Only, I wonder what could have happened, seeing that everyone knows Lucien doesn't like trouble, and you yourself no longer dabble in this sort of thing. By the way,

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Martino's brother, who embarked from the Ile de Ré yesterday, sends his regards."

All very friendly. Good-humored, too. All the same Christiani had started, and the Bank Clerk jumped to his feet. Taking advantage of this, Maigret patted his pockets and drew out a powerful flick knife. "Dangerous stuff, sonny. Shouldn't go round with toys like that. And you, Christiani, haven't you anything for me in your pocket?"

Christiani shrugged, took out a Smith and Wesson revolver, and handed it over to the Inspector.

"Well! One bullet's missing. No doubt the one that broke the mirror. What really surprises me is that you haven't replaced the bullet, and you haven't bothered to clean the barrel."

He slipped knife, truncheon, and revolver into the pocket of his overcoat and, without seeming to, proceeded to search every corner, even opening the refrigerator and the telephone booth. But, above all, his mind was hard at work. He was trying to understand. He built up hypotheses, and rejected them, one after the other.

"You know the Niçois told Martino that someone squealed on his brother? At least, so I've heard. If I let you go, it's so that you can avoid him, for he could bear you a grudge, and he has a habit of being armed."

"What're you getting at?" grumbled Christiani, who appeared to be keeping as calm as Maigret.

"Nothing. I'd like to see Martino. I don't know why, but I'd be interested to see him."

Meanwhile he had made certain that nobody, alive or dead, was hidden in the restaurant or in either the kitchen or in Lucien and Marina's bedroom, which opened off it.

At half-past nine a delivery man brought in a case of *apéritifs,* and then, almost immediately after, a huge yellow moving van from the firm of Duchemin drew up in front of the building, and left again a little later.

"Marina, give me a slice of that homemade sausage of yours."

Then, suddenly, Maigret's brows furrowed, for out of the bedroom there emerged a new character, who was as surprised as the Inspector.

"Where've *you* come from?"

"I—I was lying down."

It was Fred, an associate of Christiani's in certain of his businesses. And he was lying, for Maigret had checked that the bedroom was empty.

"From what I can see," the Inspector grumbled, "you are all so attached to this place that you won't leave it. Give me your gun, too."

Fred hesitated, then handed over his revolver, another Smith and Wesson, fully loaded.

"You'll give it back to me?"

"Maybe. That's going to depend on what Martino tells me. I'm ex-

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pecting him any minute now . . . Yes, I told him to meet me here."

He was watching their faces; he saw René Lecœur grow pale and empty his glass.

One more attempt. He had at all costs to hit on it, and Maigret did, the moment he caught sight of a heavy truck passing in the street outside.

"Take the receiver off," he ordered Christiani. He didn't want to go into the booth himself—from there he couldn't keep an eye on his flock.

"Get me Police Headquarters. Ask for Lucas . . . You've got him? Hand me the receiver."

Luckily the cord was long enough.

"Is that you, Lucas? You're to phone immediately to Duchemin, the moving people. You must trace a van of theirs that has just delivered or picked up something on Rue Pigalle. Understand? See what is is. Quick as you can. I'll stay here, yes."

Then turning toward the kitchen, "What about that sausage, Marina?"

"Here you are, Inspector. Here you are."

"I don't think these gentlemen want any. If I'm not very much mistaken, they aren't feeling hungry."

At ten past eleven everyone was still in his place, including the Niçois and his companion in the bar opposite.

At eleven minutes past eleven Lucas jumped out of a taxi in great excitement, pushed open the door, and signaled to Maigret that he had something important to tell him.

"You can speak in front of these gentlemen—they're friends."

"I was able to catch the van at Boulevard Rochechouart. They picked up a trunk. They were telephoned for from here—a tenant on the third floor, Monsieur Bécheval. A huge trunk, or rather a chest, to be sent by train to Quimper."

"You let it go, I hope?" Maigret said jokingly.

"I had it opened . . . There was a body inside—Martino, the brother of—"

"I know. Go on."

"Dr. Paul was at home, and he was able to come immediately. I have the bullet, which was still in the wound."

Maigret toyed with it casually, and murmured, as if to himself, "Browning, 6.35. You see how this is turning out. These gentlemen, who spent the night here, have only Smith and Wessons."

There was no way of foreseeing what he was about to do. Even at that moment no casual customer coming in would have sensed anything dramatic. Lucien was still straining himself to keep busy behind the bar.

"Would you like to know what I think? Keep it between ourselves, eh? Last night Martino, who had been drinking too much, made up

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his mind it was because of Christiani that his brother had been packed off to Guiana. He came back to pay him out, but as it turned out he was so much on edge that he met with an accident."

Even Lucas wondered what his chief was getting at. Christiani lit a cigarette and blew out the smoke with assumed nonchalance.

"Only, the Niçois and Pepito were waiting out in the street. They didn't dare come in, but waited for the others at the door instead.

"D'you see now? That's why our friends here slept sitting up while the Niçois did sentry duty outside and then, at first light, took up his position in the bar. The biggest problem was this blessed corpse, which couldn't after all just be left on Lucien's hands. What would you have done, Christiani? You're a clever man."

Christiani shrugged disdainfully.

"Answer me, Lucien—what is this Bécheval from the third floor?"

"A helpless old man."

"Just as I thought. Someone went up there in the early morning and told him to keep his mouth shut. Before the household awoke they carried the corpse upstairs, going by the back way, and locked it up in one of the old man's chests. Then they telephoned to Duchemin.

"Lucas, go and ask on the third floor if that isn't right. I'm sure they'll come out with a description of our friend Fred here, who took on the job."

"What does that prove?" Fred growled.

"Certainly not that it was you who bumped him off. Marina! Give them some sausage, after all. I'm going to bring them to headquarters and it might take me quite a time to deal with them."

Still no sign of tragedy—as was proved when a cashier came in with a bill and completed his business with Lucien, without noticing anything.

"You've still got nothing to say to me, Christiani?"

"Nothing."

"And you, Bank Clerk? I must say, this is the first time I've found you mixed up in a serious affair."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," the youngster said in a strained voice.

"Then there's nothing to do but wait for Lucas."

They waited. And across the street the others were still waiting, too. And the street got busier as the sky cleared a little and the day brightened.

"Bad luck, Lucien, that this should have happened at your place! Must never let your mirror get broken—it's bad luck."

Lucas came back, announcing, "Just as you said. I found the old man gagged. He gave me a description of Fred, but there was someone else last night, but he didn't see him. They jumped on him while he was still asleep."

"That's fine! Phone for a taxi.

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Wait. Phone headquarters as well and ask them to send someone to watch those fellows opposite so that they don't start something."

And scratching his head, Maigret looked at his trio of beauties and sighed, "By then perhaps we'll know which of you did the shooting."

Maigret, like a man with all the time in the world and nothing to do with it, picked one of the tables and spread out on it a real display, placing Christiani's truncheon beside his revolver and Fred's, then putting Lecœur's knife a little distance away.

"Now, don't get worked up about what I'm going to say to you, son," he threw at Lecœur, who looked as if he was about to faint. "This is your first job, but it probably won't be your last. That revolver there, you see, is definitely Christiani's—he's been too long in the game to play around with a little Browning like the one that killed Martino. Fred, too, is an old hand, who prefers serious weapons. When the fighting broke out, Christiani fired, but somebody must have knocked his arm because all he hit was the mirror. Then you, with your little Browning—"

"I haven't got a Browning!" the Bank Clerk managed to bring out.

"Precisely! *It's just because you haven't got one that it must have been you who fired*. Fred kept his gun, because he knew it would prove his innocence. Christiani didn't even clean his, to prove that he fired only one bullet, which didn't hit anybody. They both know what they're about, and they both stuck to the rules. While you—you had to get rid of your revolver since it would have proved you're the murderer. Where did you put it?"

"I didn't kill anyone!"

"I'm asking you where you put it."

"Ask Christiani."

"It's too late to put on an act."

"You won't find a Browning."

Maigret looked at him pityingly and murmured, tight-lipped, "You fool!"

The more so as Martino was not out to get him, and, if he had really fired the shot, it was only to prove to the others that he had the nerve to do so.

When Lucas returned, Maigret said to him in an undertone, "Look everywhere, especially on the roof. They wouldn't have been stupid enough to hide the gun here at Lucien's, or in the old man's place. Oh, yes, at the top of the stairs there's a skylight to the roof."

He led away his troop, while two or three suspiciously innocent-looking strollers kept watch on the bistro opposite.

Christiani, in his camel's-hair coat, looked like a respectable citizen who was being taken away by mistake and would shortly be released with apologies. Fred swaggered. The Bank Clerk tensed every nerve in his body.

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It was *the* classic case. Maigret had always claimed that, but for chance, fifty per cent of criminals would escape punishment, and, but for informers, the other fifty per cent would remain free.

This gave the impression of being a witticism, especially when he rolled it out in his fine gruff voice. All the same, an informer had played a part in it, and then chance had led him to notice the yellow Duchemin moving van. However, that still left a good fraction of professional skill and knowledge of people, and even what is called flair, to play their part, too.

At three in the afternoon the Browning was found on the roof, where it had, in fact, been thrown out through the skylight.

At half-past three the Bank Clerk broke down and confessed, and Christiani, after giving the address of an eminent lawyer, said, "This will get me six months!"

Maigret, without looking at him, said with a sigh, "And that truncheon of yours only cost *me* two teeth . . ."

CRIMINALIMERICKS

MASTER OF PARIS

by D. R. BENSEN

Grim Paris, where money is hoarded
Like virtue (but stricter), afforded
Inspector Maigret
The amplest of play
For his connoisseur's sense of the sordid.

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a HERCULE POIROT short novel by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Hercule Poirot had no desire to participate in a good old-fashioned family Christmas in a Fourteenth Century English manor house, even if the wonderful old house now had oil-fired central heating; and there was really no inducement that would persuade Poirot—except one.

A crime had been committed—a crime the British government was deeply concerned about; a crime so delicate in its international complications that utter secrecy was imperative—even the police could not be called in. Obviously there was only one person in London who could be entrusted with so grave an investigation, who could be depended on to prevent a scandal and the royal consequences—so Poirot agreed to visit Kings Lacey for the Christmas holiday and exercise his "little gray cells" . . .

THE THEFT OF THE ROYAL RUBY

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"I REGRET EXCEEDINGLY . . ." SAID M. Hercule Poirot.

He was interrupted. Not rudely interrupted. The interruption was suave and dexterous.

"Please don't refuse offhand, Monsieur Poirot. There are grave issues of State. Your cooperation will be appreciated in the highest quarters."

"You are too kind," Hercule Poirot waved a hand, "but I really cannot undertake to do as you ask. At this season of the year . . ."

Again Mr. Jesmond interrupted. "Christmas time," he said persuasively. "An old-fashioned Christmas in the English countryside."

Hercule Poirot shivered. The English countryside at this season of the year did not attract him.

"A goood old-fashioned Christmas!" Mr. Jesmond stressed it.

"Me—I am not an Englishman," said Hercule Poirot. "In my country Christmas, it is for the children. The New Year, that is what we celebrate."

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"Ah," said Mr. Jesmond, "but Christmas in England is a great institution and I assure you at Kings Lacey you would see it at its best. It's a wonderful old house, you know. Why, one wing of it dates from the Fourteenth Century."

Again Poirot shivered. The thought of a Fourteenth Century English manor house filled him with apprehension. He had suffered too often in the historic country houses of England. He looked round appreciatively at his comfortable modern flat with its radiators and the latest patent devices for excluding any kind of draft.

"In the winter," he said firmly, "I do not leave London."

"I don't think you quite appreciate, Monsieur Poirot, what a very serious matter this is." Mr. Jesmond glanced at his companion and then back at Poirot.

Poirot's second visitor had up to now said nothing but a polite and formal "How do you do." He sat now, gazing down at his well-polished shoes, with an air of the utmost dejection on his coffee-colored face. He was a young man, not more than twenty-three, and he was clearly in a state of complete misery.

"Yes, yes," said Hercule Poirot. "Of course the matter is serious. I do appreciate that. His Highness has my heartfelt sympathy."

"The position is one of the utmost delicacy," said Mr. Jesmond.

Poirot transferred his gaze from the young man to his older companion. If one wanted to sum up Mr. Jesmond in a word, the word would have been discretion. Everything about Mr. Jesmond was discreet. His well-cut but inconspicuous clothes, his agreeable, well-bred voice which rarely soared out of an agreeable monotone, his light-brown hair just thinning a little at the temples, his pale serious face. It seemed to Hercule Poirot that he had known not one Mr. Jesmond but a dozen Mr. Jesmonds in his time, all using sooner or later the same phrase—"a position of the utmost delicacy."

"The police," said Hercule Poirot, "can be very discreet, you know."

Mr. Jesmond shook his head firmly.

"Not the police," he said. "To recover the—er—what we want to recover will almost inevitably involve taking proceedings in the law courts and we know so little. We *suspect,* but we do not *know.*"

"You have my sympathy," said Hercule Poirot again.

If he imagined that his sympathy was going to mean anything to his two visitors, he was wrong. They did not want sympathy, they wanted practical help. Mr. Jesmond began once more to talk about the delights of an English Christmas.

"It's dying out, you know," he said, "the real old-fashioned type of Christmas. People spend it at hotels nowadays. But an English Christmas with all the family gathered round, the children and their stock-

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ings, the Christmas tree, the turkey and plum pudding, the crackers. The snowman outside the window . . ."

In the interests of exactitude. Hercule Poirot intervened.

"To make a snowman one has to have the snow," he remarked severely. "And one cannot have snow to order, even for an English Christmas."

"I was talking to a friend of mine in the meteorological office only today," said Mr. Jesmond, "and he tells me that it is highly probable there *will* be snow this Christmas."

It was the wrong thing to have said. Hercule Poirot shuddered more forcefully than ever.

"Snow in the country!" he said. "That would be still more abominable. A large, cold, stone manor house."

"Not at all," said Mr. Jesmond. "Things have changed very much in the last ten years or so. Oil-fired central heating."

"They have oil-fired central heating at Kings Lacey?" asked Poirot. For the first time he seemed to waver.

Mr. Jesmond seized his opportunity. "Yes, indeed," he said, "and a splendid hot water system. Radiators in every bedroom. I assure you, my dear Monsieur Poirot, Kings Lacey is comfort itself in the wintertime. You might even find the house *too* warm."

"That is most unlikely," said Hercule Poirot.

With practiced dexterity Mr. Jesmond shifted his ground a little.

"You can appreciate the terrible dilemma we are in," he said, in a confidential manner.

Hercule Poirot nodded. The problem was, indeed, not a happy one. A young potentate-to-be, the only son of the ruler of a rich and important native State had arrived in London a few weeks ago. His country had been passing through a period of restlessness and discontent. Though loyal to the father whose way of life had remained persistently Eastern, popular opinion was somewhat dubious of the younger generation. His follies had been Western ones and as such looked upon with disapproval.

Recently, however, his betrothal had been announced. He was to marry a cousin of the same blood, a young woman who, though educated at Cambridge, was careful to display no Western influences in her own country. The wedding day was announced and the young prince had made a journey to England, bringing with him some of the famous jewels of his house to be reset in appropriate modern settings by Cartier. These had included a very famous ruby which had been removed from its cumbersome old-fashioned necklace and had been given a new look by the famous jewelers.

So far so good, but after this came the snag. It was not to be supposed that a young man possessed of much

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wealth and convivial tastes, should not commit a few follies of the pleasanter type. As to that there would have been no censure. Young princes were supposed to amuse themselves in this fashion. For the prince to take the girl friend of the moment for a walk down Bond Street and bestow upon her an emerald bracelet or a diamond clip as a reward for the pleasure she had afforded him would have been regarded as quite natural and suitable, corresponding in fact to the Cadillac cars which his father invariably presented to his favorite dancing girl of the moment.

But the prince had been far more indiscreet than that. Flattered by the lady's interest, he had displayed to her the famous ruby in its new setting, and had finally been so unwise as to accede to her request to be allowed to wear it—just for one evening!

The sequel was short and sad. The lady had retired from their supper table to powder her nose. Time passed. She did not return. She had left the establishment by another door and since then had disappeared into space. The important and distressing thing was that the ruby in its new setting had disappeared with her.

These were the facts that could not possibly be made public without the most dire consequences. The ruby was something more than a ruby, it was a historical possession of great significance, and the circumstances of its disappearance were such that any undue publicity might result in the most serious political consequences.

Mr. Jesmond was not the man to put these facts into simple language. He wrapped them up, as it were, in a great deal of verbiage. Who exactly Mr. Jesmond was, Hercule Poirot did not exactly know. He had met other Mr. Jesmonds in the course of his career. Whether he was connected with the Home Office, the Foreign Office, or some more discreet branch of public service was not specified. He was acting in the interests of the Commonwealth. The ruby must be recovered.

M. Poirot, so Mr. Jesmond delicately insisted, was the man to recover it.

"Perhaps—yes," Hercule Poirot admitted, "but you can tell me so little. Suggestion—suspicion—all that is not very much to go upon."

"Come now, Monsieur Poirot, surely it is not beyond your powers. Ah, come now."

"I do not always succeed."

But this was mock modesty. It was clear enough from Poirot's tone that for him to undertake a mission was almost synonymous with succeeding in it.

"His Highness is very young," Mr. Jesmond said. "It will be sad if his whole life is to be blighted for a mere youthful indiscretion."

Poirot looked kindly at the downcast young man. "It is the time for follies, when one is young," he said

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encouragingly, "and for the ordinary young man it does not matter so much. The good papa, he pays up; the family lawyer, he helps to disentangle the inconvenience; the young man, he learns by experience and all ends for the best. In a position such as yours, it is hard indeed. Your approaching marriage . . ."

"That is it. That is it exactly." For the first time words poured from the young man. "You see she is very, very serious. She takes life very seriously. She has acquired at Cambridge many very serious ideas. There is to be education in my country. There are to be schools. There are to be many things. All in the name of progress, you understand, of democracy. It will not be, she says, as it was in my father's time. Naturally she knows that I will have diversions in London, but not the scandal. No! It is the scandal that matters. You see it is very, very famous, this ruby. There is a long trail behind it, a history. Much bloodshed—many deaths!"

"Deaths," said Hercule Poirot thoughtfully. He looked at Mr. Jesmond. "One hopes," he said, "it will not come to that?"

Mr. Jesmond made a peculiar noise rather like a hen who has decided to lay an egg and then thought better of it.

"No, no, indeed," he said, sounding rather prim. "There is no question, I am sure, of anything of *that* kind."

"You cannot be sure," said Hercule Poirot. "Whoever has the ruby now, there may be others who want to gain possession of it, and who will not stick at a trifle, my friend."

"I really don't think," said Mr. Jesmond, sounding more prim than ever, "that we need enter into speculations of that kind. Quite unprofitable."

"Me," said Hercule Poirot, suddenly becoming very foreign, "me, I explore all the avenues, like the politicians."

Mr. Jesmond looked at him doubtfully. Pulling himself together, he said, "Well, I can take it that is settled, Monsieur Poirot? You will go to Kings Lacey?"

"And how do I explain myself there?" asked Hercule Poirot.

Mr. Jesmond smiled with confidence.

"That, I think, can be arranged very easily," he said. "I can assure you that it will all seem quite natural. You will find the Laceys most charming. Delightful people."

"And you do not deceive me about the oil-fired central heating?"

"No, no, indeed." Mr. Jesmond sounded quite pained. "I assure you you will find every comfort."

"Tout confort moderne," murmured Poirot to himself reminiscently. *"Eh bien,"* he said, "I accept."

The temperature in the long drawing room at Kings Lacey was a comfortable 68 as Hercule Poirot sat talking to Mrs. Lacey by one of the big mullioned windows. Mrs. Lacey

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was engaged in needlework. She was not doing *petit point* or embroidering flowers on silk. Instead, she appeared to be engaged in the prosaic task of hemming dishcloths. As she sewed she talked in a soft reflective voice that Poirot found very charming.

"I hope you will enjoy our Christmas party here, Monsieur Poirot. It's only the family, you know. My granddaughter and a grandson and a friend of his and Bridget who's my great-niece, and Diana who's a cousin and David Welwyn who is a very old friend. Just a family party. But Edwina Morecombe said that that's what you really wanted to see. An old-fashioned Christmas. Nothing could be more old-fashioned than we are!

"My husband, you know, absolutely lives in the past. He likes everything to be just as it was when he was a boy of twelve years old, and used to come here for his holidays." She smiled to herself. "All the same old things, the Christmas tree and the stockings hung up and the oyster soup and the turkey—two turkeys, one boiled and one roast—and the plum pudding with the ring and the bachelor's button and all the rest of it in it. We can't have sixpences nowadays because they're not pure silver any more. But all the old desserts, the Elvas plums and Carlsbad plums and almonds and raisins, and crystallized fruit and ginger. Dear me, I sound like a catalogue from Fortnum and Mason!"

"You arouse my gastronomic juices, madame."

"I expect we'll all have frightful indigestion by tomorrow evening," said Mrs. Lacey. "One isn't used to eating so much nowadays, is one?"

She was interrupted by some loud shouts and whoops of laughter outside the window. She glanced out.

"I don't know what they're doing out there. Playing some game or other, I suppose. I've always been so afraid, you know, that these young people would be bored by our Christmas here. But not at all, it's just the opposite. Now my own son and daughter and their friends, they used to be rather sophisticated about Christmas. Say it was all nonsense and too much fuss and it would be far better to go out to a hotel somewhere and dance. But the younger generation seem to find all this terribly attractive. Besides," added Mrs. Lacey practically, "schoolboys and schoolgirls are always hungry, aren't they? I think they must starve them at these schools. After all, one does know children of that age each eat about as much as three strong men."

Poirot laughed and said, "It is most kind of you and your husband, madame, to include me in your family party."

"Oh, we're both delighted, I'm sure," said Mrs. Lacey. "And if you find Horace a little gruff," she continued, "pay no attention. It's just his manner, you know."

What her husband, Colonel Lacey, had actually said was:

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"Can't think why you want one of these damned foreigners here cluttering up Christmas. Why can't we have him some other time? Can't stick foreigners! All right, all right, so Edwina Morecombe wished him on us. What's it got to do with *her*, I should like to know? Why doesn't *she* have him for Christmas?"

"Because you know very well," Mrs. Lacey had said, "that Edwina always goes to Claridge's."

Her husband had looked at her piercingly and said, "Not up to something are you, Em?"

"Up to something?" said Em, opening her blue eyes. "Of course not. Why should I be?"

Old Colonel Lacey laughed, a deep rumbling laugh. "I wouldn't put it past you, Em," he said. "When you look your most innocent is when you *are* up to something."

Revolving these things in her mind, Mrs. Lacey went on, "Edwina said she thought perhaps you might help us . . . I'm sure I don't know quite how, but she said that friends of yours had once found you very helpful in—in a case something like ours. I—well, perhaps you don't know what I'm talking about?"

Poirot looked at her encouragingly. Mrs. Lacey was close to 70, as upright as a ramrod, with snow-white hair, pink cheeks, blue eyes, a ridiculous nose, and a determined chin.

"If there is anything I can do I shall only be too happy to do it," said Poirot. "It is, I understand, a rather unfortunate matter of a young girl's infatuation."

Mrs. Lacey nodded. "Yes. It seems extraordinary that I should —well, want to talk to you about it. After all, you *are* a perfect stranger . . ."

"*And* a foreigner," said Poirot, in an understanding manner.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lacey, "but perhaps that makes it easier, in a way. Anyhow, Edwina seemed to think that you might perhaps know something—how shall I put it—something useful about this young Desmond Lee-Wortley."

Poirot paused a moment to admire the ingenuity of Mr. Jesmond and the ease with which he had made use of Lady Morecombe to further his own purposes.

"He has not, I understand, a very good reputation, this young man?" he began delicately.

"No, indeed, he hasn't! A very bad reputation! But that's no help so far as Sarah is concerned. It's never any good, is it, telling young girls that men have a bad reputation? It—it just spurs them on!"

"You are so very right," said Poirot.

"In my young day," went on Mrs. Lacey. "Oh dear, that's a very long time ago! We used to be warned, you know, against certain young men, and of course it *did* heighten one's interest in them, and if one could possibly manage to dance with them, or to be alone with them

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in a dark conservatory . . ." she laughed. "That's why I wouldn't let Horace do any of the things he wanted to do."

"Tell me," said Poirot, "exactly what it is that troubles you?"

"Our son was killed in the war," said Mrs. Lacey. "My daughter-in-law died when Sarah was born so that Sarah has always been with us, and we've brought her up. Perhaps we've brought her up unwisely—I don't know. But we thought we ought always to leave her as free as possible."

"That is desirable, I think," said Poirot. "One cannot go against the spirit of the times."

"No," said Mrs. Lacey, "that's just what I felt about it. And, of course, girls nowadays do this sort of thing."

Poirot looked at her inquiringly.

"I think the way one expresses it," said Mrs. Lacey, "is that Sarah has got in with what they call the coffee-bar set. She won't go to dances or come out properly or be a deb or anything of that kind. Instead she has two rather unpleasant rooms in Chelsea down by the river and wears these funny clothes that they like to wear, and black stockings, or bright green ones. Very thick stockings. So prickly, I always think! And she goes about without washing or combing her hair."

"*Ça, c'est, tout à fait naturelle,*" said Poirot. "It is the fashion of the moment. They grow out of it."

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Lacey. "I wouldn't worry about *that* sort of thing. But you see she's taken up with this Desmond Lee-Wortley and he really has a *very* unsavory reputation. He lives more or less on well-to-do girls. They seem to go quite mad about him. He very nearly married the Hope girl, but her people got her made a ward in court or something. And of course that's what Horace wants to do. He says he must do it for her protection.

"But I don't think it's really a good idea, Monsieur Poirot. I mean, they'll just run away together and go to Scotland or Ireland or the Artine or somewhere and either get married or else live together without getting married. And although it may be contempt of court and all that—well, it isn't really an answer, is it, in the end? Especially if a baby's coming. One has to give in then, and let them get married. And then, nearly always, it seems to me, after a year or two there's a divorce. And then the girl comes home and usually after a year or two she marries someone so nice he's almost dull and settles down.

"But it's particularly sad, it seems to me, if there is a child, because it's not the same thing, being brought up by a stepfather, however nice. No, I think it's much better if we did as we did in my young days. I mean the first young man one fell in love with was *always* someone undesirable. I remember I had a horrible passion for a young man called—now what was his name?—

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how strange it is, I can't remember his Christian name at all! Tibbitt, that was his surname. Young Tibbitt.

"Of course, my father more or less forbade him the house, but he used to get asked to the same dances, and we used to dance together. And sometimes we'd escape and sit out together and occasionally friends would arrange picnics to which we both went. Of course, it was all very exciting and forbidden and one enjoyed it enormously. But one didn't go to the—well, to the *lengths* that girls go nowadays. And so, after a while, the Mr. Tibbitts faded out. And do you know, when I saw him four years later I was surprised what I could *ever* have seen in him! He seemed to be such a *dull* young man. Flashy, you know. No interesting conversation."

"One always thinks the days of one's own youth are best," said Poirot, somewhat sententiously.

"I know," said Mrs. Lacey. "It's tiresome, isn't it? I mustn't be tiresome. But all the same I *don't* want Sarah, who's a dear girl really, to marry Desmond Lee-Wortley. She and David Welwyn, who is staying here, were always such friends and so fond of each other, and we did hope, Horace and I, that they would grow up and marry. But of course she just finds him dull now, and she's absolutely infatuated with Desmond."

"I do not quite understand, madame," said Poirot. "You have him here now, staying in the house, this Desmond Lee-Wortley?"

"That's *my* doing," said Mrs. Lacey. "Horace was all for forbidding her to see him and all that. Of course, in Horace's day, the father or guardian would have called round at the young man's lodgings with a horse whip! Horace was all for forbidding the fellow the house, and forbidding the girl to see him. I told him that was quite the wrong attitude to take.

"'No,' I said. 'Ask him down here. We'll have him down for Christmas with the family party.' Of course, my husband said I was mad! But I said, 'At any rate, dear, let's *try* it. Let her see him in *our* atmosphere and *our* house and we'll be very nice to him and very polite, and perhaps then he'll seem less interesting to her'!"

"I think, as they say, you *have* something there, madame," said Poirot. "I think your point of view is very wise. Wiser than your husband's."

"Well, I hope it is," said Mrs. Lacey doubtfully. "It doesn't seem to be working much yet. But of course he's only been here a couple of days." A sudden dimple showed in her wrinkled cheek. "I'll confess something to you, Monsieur Poirot. I myself can't help liking him. I don't mean I *really* like him, with my *mind,* but I can feel the charm all right. Oh yes, I can see what Sarah sees in him.

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"But I'm an old enough woman and have enough experience to know that he's absolutely no good. Even if I *do* enjoy his company. Though I do think," added Mrs. Lacey rather wistfully, "he has *some* good points. He asked if he might bring his sister here, you know. She's had an operation and was in the hospital. He said it was so sad for her being in a nursing home over Christmas and he wondered if it would be too much trouble if he could bring her with him. He said he'd take all her meals up to her and all that. Well now, I do think that *was* rather nice of him, don't you, Monsieur Poirot?"

"It shows a consideration," said Poirot thoughtfully, "which seems almost out of character."

"Oh, I don't know. You can have family affections at the same time as wishing to prey on a rich young girl. Sarah will be *very* rich, you know, not only with what we leave her—and of course that won't be very much because most of the money goes with the place to Colin, my grandson. But her mother was a very rich woman and Sarah will inherit all her money when she's twenty-one. She's only twenty now.

"No, I do think it was nice of Desmond to mind about his sister. And he didn't pretend she was anything very wonderful or that. She's a shorthand typist, I gather—does secretarial work in London. And he's been as good as his word and does carry up trays to her. Not all the time, of course, but quite often. So I think he has some nice points. But all the same," said Mrs. Lacey with great decision, "I don't want Sarah to marry him."

"From all I have heard and been told," said Poirot, "that would indeed be a disaster."

"Do you think it would be possible for you to help us in any way?" asked Mrs. Lacey.

"I think it is possible, yes," said Hercule Poirot, "but I do not wish to promise too much. For the Mr. Desmond Lee-Wortleys of this world are clever, madame. But do not despair. One can, perhaps, do a little something. I shall at any rate put forth my best endeavors, if only in gratitude for your kindness in asking me here for this Christmas festivity."

He looked round him. "And it cannot be so easy these days to have Christmas festivities."

"No, indeed," Mrs. Lacey sighed. She leaned forward. "Do you know, Monsieur Poirot, what I really dream of—what I would love to have?"

"But tell me, madame."

"I simply long to have a small modern bungalow. No, perhaps not a bungalow exactly, but a small modern easy-to-run house built somewhere in the park here, and live in it with an absolutely up-to-date kitchen and no long passages. Everything easy and simple."

"It is a very practical idea, madame."

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"It's not practical for me," said Mrs. Lacey. "My husband *adores* this place. He *loves* living here. He doesn't mind being slightly uncomfortable, he doesn't mind the inconveniences, and he would hate, simply *hate,* to live in a small modern house in the park!"

"So you sacrifice yourself to his wishes?"

Mrs. Lacey drew herself up. "I do not consider it a sacrifice, Monsieur Poirot," she said. "I married my husband with the wish to make him happy. He has been a good husband to me and made me very happy all these years, and I wish to give happiness to him."

"So you will continue to live here," said Poirot.

"It's not really too uncomfortable," said Mrs. Lacey.

"No, no," said Poirot hastily. "On the contrary, it is most comfortable. Your central heating and your bath water are perfection."

"We spent a lot of money in making the house comfortable to live in," said Mrs. Lacey. "We were able to sell some land. Ripe for development, I think they call it. Fortunately out of sight of the house on the other side of the park. Really rather an ugly bit of ground with no nice view, but we got a very good price for it. So that we have been able to have as many improvements as possible."

"But the service, madame?"

"Oh, well, that presents less difficulty than you might think. Of course, one cannot expect to be looked after and waited upon as one used to be. Different people come in from the village. Two women in the morning, another two to cook lunch and wash it up, and different ones again in the evening. There are plenty of people who want to come and work for a few hours a day. Of course for Christmas we are very lucky. My dear Mrs. Ross always comes in every Christmas. She is a wonderful cook, really first-class. She retired about ten years ago, but she comes in to help us in any emergency. Then there is dear Peverill."

"Your butler?"

"Yes. He is pensioned off and lives in the little house near the lodge, but he is so devoted, and he insists on coming to wait on us at Christmas. Really, I'm terrified, Monsieur Poirot, because he's so old and so shaky that I feel certain that if he carries anything heavy he will drop it. It's really an agony to watch him. And his heart is not good and I'm afraid of his doing too much. But it would hurt his feelings dreadfully if I did not let him come.

"He hems and hahs and makes disapproving noises when he sees the state our silver is in and within three days of being here, it is all wonderful again. Yes, he is a dear faithful friend." She smiled at Poirot. "So you see, we are all set for a happy Christmas. A white Christmas, too," she added as she

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looked out of the window. "See? It is beginning to snow. Ah, the children are coming in. You must meet them, Monsieur Poirot."

Poirot was introduced with due ceremony. First, to Colin and Michael, the schoolboy grandson and his friend, nice polite lads of fifteen, one dark, one fair. Then to their cousin, Bridget, a black-haired girl of about the same age with enormous vitality.

"And this is my granddaughter, Sarah," said Mrs. Lacey.

Poirot looked with some interest at Sarah, an attractive girl with a mop of red hair; her manner seemed to him nervy and a trifle defiant, but she showed real affection for her grandmother.

"And this is Mr. Lee-Wortley."

Mr. Lee-Wortley wore a fisherman's jersey and tight black jeans; his hair was rather long and it seemed doubtful whether he had shaved that morning. In contrast to him was a young man introduced as David Welwyn, who was solid and quiet, with a pleasant smile, and rather obviously addicted to soap and water. There was one other member of the party, a handsome, rather intense-looking girl who was introduced as Diana Middleton.

Tea was brought in. A hearty meal of scones, crumpets, sandwiches, and three kinds of cake. The younger members of the party appreciated the tea.

Colonel Lacey came in last, remarking in a noncommittal voice, "Hey, tea? Oh, yes, tea."

He received his cup of tea from his wife's hand, helped himself to two scones, cast a look of aversion at Desmond Lee-Wortley and sat down as far away from him as he could. He was a big man with bushy eyebrows and a red, weather-beaten face. He might have been taken for a farmer rather than the lord of the manor.

"Started to snow," he said. "It's going to be a white Christmas all right."

After tea the party dispersed.

"I expect they'll go and play with their tape recorders now," said Mrs. Lacey to Poirot. She looked indulgently after her grandson as he left the room. Her tone was that of one who says, "The children are going to play with their toy soldiers."

"They're frightfully technical, of course," she said, "and very grand about it all."

The boys and Bridget, however, decided to go along to the lake and see if the ice on it was likely to make skating possible.

"I thought we could have skated on it this morning," said Colin. "But old Hodgkins said no. He's always so terribly careful."

"Come for a walk, David," said Diana Middleton softly. David hesitated for half a moment, his eyes on Sarah's red head. She was standing by Desmond Lee-Wortley, her hand on his arm, looking up into his face.

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"All right," said David Welwyn, "yes, let's."

Diana slipped a quick hand through his arm and they turned toward the door into the garden.

Sarah said, "Shall we go, too, Desmond? It's fearfully stuffy in the house."

"Who wants to walk?" said Desmond. "I'll get my car out. We'll go along to the Speckled Boar and have a drink."

Sarah hesitated for a moment before saying, "Let's go to Market Ledbury to the White Hart. It's much more fun."

Though for all the world she would not have put it into words, Sarah had an instinctive revulsion to going down to the local pub with Desmond. It was, somehow, not in the tradition of Kings Lacey. The women of Kings Lacey had never frequented the bar of the Speckled Boar. She had an obscure feeling that to go there would be to let Old Colonel Lacey and his wife down.

And why not? Desmond Lee-Wortley would have said? For a moment of exasperation Sarah felt that he ought to know why not! One didn't upset such old darlings as Grandfather and dear old Em unless it was necessary. They'd been very sweet, really, letting her lead her own life, not understanding in the least why she wanted to live in Chelsea the way she did, but accepting it. That was due to Em, of course. Grandfather would have kicked up no end of a row.

Sarah had no illusions about her grandfather's attitude. It was not his doing that Desmond had been asked to stay at Kings Lacey. That was Em, and Em was a darling and always had been.

When Desmond had gone to fetch his car, Sarah popped her head into the drawing room again.

"We're going over to Market Ledbury," she said. "We thought we'd have a drink there at the White Hart."

There was a slight amount of defiance in her voice, but Mrs. Lacey did not seem to notice it.

"Well, dear," she said, "I'm sure that will be very nice. David and Diana have gone for a walk, I see. I'm so glad. I really think it was a brainwave on my part to ask Diana here. So sad being left a widow so young—only twenty-two—I do hope she marries again *soon*."

Sarah looked at her sharply. "What are you up to, Em?"

"It's my little plan," said Mrs. Lacey gleefully. "I think she's just right for David. Of course I knew he was terribly in love with *you*, Sarah dear, but you'd no use for him and I realize that he isn't your type. But I don't want him to go on being unhappy, and I think Diana will really suit him."

"What a matchmaker you are, Em," said Sarah.

"I know," said Mrs. Lacey. "Old women always are. Diana's quite keen on him already, I think. Don't you think she's right for him?"

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"I shouldn't say so," said Sarah. "I think Diana's far too—well, too intense, too serious. I should think David would find it terribly boring being married to her."

"Well, we'll see," said Mrs. Lacey. "Anyway, *you* don't want him, do you, dear?"

"No, indeed," said Sarah very quickly. She added, in a sudden rush, "You *do* like Desmond, don't you, Em?"

"I'm sure he's very nice indeed," said Mrs. Lacey.

"Grandfather doesn't like him," said Sarah.

"Well, you could hardly expect him to, could you?" said Mrs. Lacey reasonably, "but I daresay he'll come round when he gets used to the idea. You mustn't rush him, Sarah dear. Old people are very slow to change their minds and your grandfather *is* rather obstinate."

"I don't care what Grandfather thinks or says," said Sarah. "I shall get married to Desmond whenever I like!"

"I know, dear, I know. But do try and be realistic about it. Your grandfather could cause a lot of trouble, you know. You're not of age yet. In another year you can do as you please. I expect Horace will have come round long before that."

"You're on my side, aren't you, darling?" said Sarah. She flung her arms round her grandmother's neck and gave her an affectionate kiss.

"I want you to be happy," said Mrs. Lacey. "Ah, there's your young man bringing his car round. You know, I like these very tight trousers these young men wear nowadays. They look so smart—only, of course, it does accentuate knock-knees."

Yes, Sarah thought, Desmond *does* have knock-knees; she had never noticed it before . . .

"Go on, dear, enjoy yourself," said Mrs. Lacey.

She watched her go out to the car, and then, remembering her foreign guest, she went along to the library. Looking in, however, she saw that Hercule Poirot was taking a pleasant little nap, and smiling to herself, she went across the hall and out into the kitchen to have a conference with Mrs. Ross.

"Come on, beautiful," asid Desmond. "Your family cutting up rough because you're coming out to a pub? Years behind the times here, aren't they?"

"Of course they're not making a fuss," said Sarah sharply as she got into the car.

"What's the idea of having that foreign fellow down? He's a detective, isn't he? What needs detecting here?"

"Oh, he's not here professionally," said Sarah. "Edwina Morecombe, my godmother, asked us to have him. I think he retired from professional work long ago."

"Sounds like a broken-down old cab horse," said Desmond.

"He wanted to see an old-fash-

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ioned English Christmas, I believe," said Sarah vaguely.

Desmond laughed scornfully. "Such a lot of tripe, that sort of thing," he said. "How you can stand it I don't know."

Sarah's red hair was tossed back and her aggressive chin shot up.

"I enjoy it!" she said defiantly.

"You can't, baby. Let's cut the whole thing tomorrow. Go over to Scarborough or somewhere."

"I couldn't possibly do that."

"Why not?"

"Oh, it would hurt their feelings."

"Oh, bilge! You know you don't enjoy this sentimental bosh."

"Well, not really perhaps, but . . ." Sarah broke off. She realized with a feeling of guilt that she was looking forward a good deal to the Christmas celebration. She enjoyed the whole thing, but she was ashamed to admit that to Desmond. It was not the thing to enjoy Christmas and family life.

Just for a moment she wished that Desmond had not come down here at Christmas time. In fact, she almost wished that Desmond had not come down here at all. It was much more fun seeing Desmond in London than here at home.

In the meantime the boys and Bridget were walking back from the lake, still discussing earnestly the problems of skating. Flecks of snow had been falling, and looking up at the sky it could be prophesied that before long there was going to be a heavy snowfall.

"It's going to snow all night," said Colin. "Bet you by Christmas morning we have a couple of feet of snow."

The prospect was a pleasurable one.

"Let's make a snowman," said Michael.

"Good lord," said Colin, "I haven't made a snowman since—well, since I was about four years old."

"I don't believe it's a bit easy to do," said Bridget. "I mean, you have to know how."

"We might make an effigy of Monsieur Poirot," said Colin. "Give it a big black mustache. There is one in the dressing-up box."

"I don't see, you know," said Michael thoughtfully, "how Monsieur Poirot could ever have been a detective. I don't see how he'd ever be able to disguise himself."

"I know," said Bridget, "and one can't imagine him running about with a microscope and looking for clues or measuring footprints."

"I've got an idea," said Colin. "Let's put on a show for him!"

"What do you mean, a show?" asked Bridget.

"Well, arrange a murder for him."

"What a gorgeous idea," said Bridget. "Do you mean a body in the snow—that sort of thing?"

"Yes. It would make him feel at home, wouldn't it?"

Bridget giggled.

"I don't know that I'd go as far as that."

"If it snows," said Colin, "we'll

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have the perfect setting. A body and footprints—we'll have to think that out rather carefully and pinch one of Grandfather's daggers and make some blood."

They came to a halt and oblivious of the rapidly falling snow, entered into an excited discussion.

"There's a paint box in the old schoolroom. We could mix up some blood—crimson-lake, I should think."

"Crimson-lake's a bit too pink, *I* think," said Bridget. "It ought to be a bit browner."

"Who's going to be the body?" asked Michael.

"I'll be the body," said Bridget quickly.

"Oh, look here," said Colin, "*I* thought of it."

"Oh, no, no," said Bridget, "it must be me. It's got to be a girl. It's more exciting. Beautiful girl lying lifeless in the snow."

"Beautiful girl! Ah-ha," said Michael in derision.

"I've got black hair, too," said Bridget.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, it'll show up so well on the snow and I shall wear my red pajamas."

"If you wear red pajamas, they won't show the bloodstains," said Michael in a practical manner.

"But they'd look so effective against the snow," said Bridget, "and they've got white facings, you know, so the blood could be on that. Oh, won't it be gorgeous? Do you think he will really be taken in?"

"He will if we do it well enough," said Michael. "We'll have just your footprints in the snow and one other person's going to the body and coming away from it—a man's, of course. He won't want to disturb them, so he won't know that you're not really dead. You don't think," Michael stopped, struck by a sudden idea, "You don't think he'll be *annoyed* about it?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so," said Bridget, with facile optimism. "I'm sure he'll understand that we've just done it to entertain him. A sort of Christmas treat."

"I don't think we ought to do it on Christmas Day," said Colin reflectively. "I don't think Grandfather would like that very much."

"The day after, then," said Bridget.

"The day after would be just right," said Michael.

"And it'll give us more time, too," pursued Bridget. "After all, there are a lot of things to arrange. Let's go and have a look at all the props."

They hurried into the house.

The evening was a busy one. Holly and mistletoe had been brought in in large quantities and a Christmas tree had been set up at one end of the dining room. Everyone helped to decorate it, to put up the branches of holly behind pictures, and to hang mistletoe in a convenient position in the hall.

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"I had no idea anything so archaic still went on," murmured Desmond to Sarah with a sneer.

"We've always done it," said Sarah defensively.

"What a reason!"

"Oh, don't be tiresome, Desmond. *I* think it's fun."

"Sarah my sweet, you *can't!*"

"Well, not—not really perhaps, but—I do in a way."

"Who's going to brave the snow and go to midnight mass?" asked Mrs. Lacey at twenty minutes to twelve.

"Not me," said Desmond. "Come on, Sarah."

With a hand on her arm he guided her into the library and went over to the record case.

"There are limits, darling," said Desmond. "Midnight mass!"

"Yes," said Sarah. "Oh, yes."

With a good deal of laughter, donning of coats, and stamping of feet, most of the others got off. The two boys, Bridget, David, and Diana set out for the ten minutes' walk to the church through the falling snow. Their laughter died away in the distance.

"Midnight mass!" said Colonel Lacey, snorting. "Never went to midnight mass in my young days. *Mass,* indeed! Popish, that is! Oh, I beg your pardon, Monsieur Poirot."

Poirot waved a hand. "It is quite all right. Do not mind me."

"Matins is good enough for anybody, I should say," said the colonel. "Proper Sunday morning service. 'Hark the herald angels sing,' and all the good old Christmas hymns. And then back to Christmas dinner. That's right, isn't it, Em?"

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Lacey. "That's what *we* do. But the young ones enjoy the midnight service. And it's nice, really, that they *want* to go."

"Sarah and that fellow don't want to go."

"Well, there dear, I think you're wrong," said Mrs. Lacey. "Sarah, you know, *did* want to go, but she didn't like to say so."

"Beats me why she cares what that fellow's opinion is."

"She's very young, really," said Mrs. Lacey placidly. "Are you going to bed, Monsieur Poirot? Good night. I hope you'll sleep well."

"And you, madame? Are you not going to bed yet?"

"Not just yet," said Mrs. Lacey. "I've got the stockings to fill, you see. Oh, I know they're all practically grown up, but they do *like* their stockings. One puts jokes in them! Silly little things. But it all makes for a lot of fun."

"You work very hard to make this a happy house at Christmas time," said Poirot. "I honor you."

He raised her hand to his lips in a courtly fashion.

"Hm," grunted Colonel Lacey, as Poirot departed. "Flowery sort of fellow. Still—he appreciates you."

Mrs. Lacey dimpled up at him. "Have you noticed, Horace, that I'm standing under the mistletoe?"

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she asked with the demureness of a girl of nineteen.

Hercule Poirot entered his bedroom. It was a large room well provided with radiators. As he went over toward the big fourposter bed he noticed an envelope lying on his pillow. He opened it and drew out a piece of paper. On it was a shakily printed message in capital letters.

DON'T EAT NONE OF THE PLUM PUDDING. ONE AS WISHES YOU WELL

Hercule Poirot stared at it. His eyebrows rose. "Cryptic," he murmured, "and most unexpected."

(*Continued on page 111*)

THE JUSTICE OF SOLOMON

by JUAN PAGE

(*conclusion to page 129*)

We believe that Solomon, who was, as we have said, rich as well as wise, might have heeded the argument of the learned Counsel for the Defense and have been convinced. Might he not have heeded it all too well and have executed the miserable Simeon ben Levi, not to punish him, but, as an even richer man, to appropriate unto himself all of Simeon's vast estates?

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 319th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Meet Kathleen Fahey and Mike Sullivan—the gadfly and the reluctant insurance investigator, who make an appealing detective team . . .

The author, Robert Goode, was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts. He was 39 and single when he submitted "The Girl Who Cried Murder." He has served a four-year hitch in the Navy and a three-year hitch in the Marine Corps, and has also worked as a postman and a bartender. No doubt Mr. Goode has seen a lot and heard a lot, as sailor, marine, postman, and bartender; he should have a lot of tales to tell . . .

THE GIRL WHO CRIED MURDER

by ROBERT GOODE

MIKE SULLIVAN WASN'T LISTENing. At least, he tried not to listen. He looked, but he wasn't listening. Kathleen Fahey was easy to look at, and she knew it and enjoyed it; but listening to her was another matter altogether. In fact, until yesterday, he hadn't spoken to her since they were seniors in college. Their social paths hadn't crossed often in school; he had worked hard paying his way through; Kathleen still thought of work as a theoretical term bandied about in an economics class, and, in Mike's opinion, she was something of a lame brain—a very pretty lame brain, but still a lame brain.

Perhaps it was envy on his part; perhaps it was just that she, and the attractive world she embodied, seemed so unattainable to a guy like himself; but whatever it was, his mind was closed. She wouldn't even have got into his office today if his secretary hadn't been absent on a coffee break; but here she was again, sitting in his one imitation-leather chair as though it were a golden throne, and she, a queen, magnanimously granting an audience to a particularly dense and obstinate subject.

"Sullivan, you're not listening to me," she said, smiling at him belligerently. "Henry Boland never killed himself, he was murdered. I know it! What do I have to do to convince you?"

"Miss Fahey," Mike said, trying

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to sound cool and business-like, which was difficult, since the sight of her always aroused in him a certain nervousness that invariably eroded his professional façade. "We went all through this yesterday. Whether Boland did or did not kill himself is not my concern. It's strictly a police problem."

"I've been to the police," she said irritably, banging a small fist on his desk. "They wouldn't listen either. Nobody will listen!"

"The police have my sympathy," he said sincerely. "They're paid to listen to citizens' complaints, I'm not. My only interest in this matter is in the fact that Henry Boland attempted to collect a half million dollars insurance money from my company for some phony paintings he claimed were stolen from him."

"Phony, my foot!" said Kathleen. "They were as fine a collection of French impressionists as you'd find in this country."

"The paintings the police found hidden in the cellar of Boland's home after the robbery were forgeries," he reminded her.

"There must be some explanation for that," she insisted. "And it's your job to find it. I knew Henry Boland. He was an honest man. Somebody must have planted those forgeries in his house."

"No good," he said, shaking his head. "Boland knew the paintings were fakes before the robbery. I think you know of Mr. Vanderwald, the museum curator?"

"Vanderwald could be wrong."

"Not likely. He's one of the country's most respected experts and he told Boland a week ago that, in his opinion, most of the paintings in his collection were extremely clever forgeries."

"Oh, the hell with Vanderwald!" said Kathleen angrily. "You couldn't fool Henry Boland on art; he was too experienced. My Aunt Nora was one of his few close friends, and a few months before her death, when she was very ill, he brought her a present, a miniature of the face of the apostle John by Simone di Martino, a Fourteenth Century Sienese artists. Martino painted twelve miniatures of the apostles, but over the centuries the others have disappeared; only the one of John survived, and Henry bought it for my aunt as a token of his affection—but *not* before he had spent considerable time and money researching its history and authenticity to make sure he was getting what he paid for. He wasn't an impetuous man. He didn't rush in and buy blindly like some collectors. He knew what he was doing, and if he thought any of his own paintings were forgeries he certainly wouldn't have invited Vanderwald to see them."

"Maybe he didn't know at the time, but when he found he'd been duped, he decided to dump them and collect the insurance."

"That's ridiculous!" she said.

"And when he got caught at it he

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shot himself rather than go to jail."

"Nothing will ever make me believe it."

"His sister believes it."

"Oh! Hester Boland hasn't got a brain in her head," said Kathleen. "She drank up whatever sense she had long ago."

"So much for Hester," shrugged Mike. "But taking her sodden opinion for what it's worth, her brother was something of an eccentric, almost a recluse, and she believes the publicity and the disgrace drove him to suicide."

"If the things Hester has done in her time didn't drive him to suicide, this never would," said Kathleen maliciously. "I'll tell you about Henry and Hester. Henry seemed awfully brusque and austere to people who didn't know him, but actually he was extremely generous and thoughtful, and art was his abiding interest in life. Hester was always more interested in the artists than in their art. She must have had one of the best collections of artists in the country. The one she has now, Karl Stenberg, paints soup cans and soap boxes, that kind of thing. Hester is a good sort, but she has no sense. She is always falling for some broken-down painter. Henry was very tolerant about it. Her escapades embarrassed him, but he ignored them. That's the way he was. He wasn't the type to swindle anyone, and he certainly wouldn't have committed suicide."

"I wish I could be as sure of things as you are," he said sarcastically. Kathleen Fahey irritated him. She spoke with all the assurance of a person who doesn't have to deal in facts, throwing out her statements like a high priestess transmitting the truths of the Gods to a group of perverse and uncomprehending lesser mortals, and Mike, at that moment, was beginning to feel very perverse. He felt sorry for the poor policeman who had to listen to her ranting.

"You're pigheaded, Sullivan. You always were. Why won't you listen to me?"

"I remember the last time I listened to you, when we were in school," he said, and began to get angry at the memory. "You talked me into helping a sweet old lady who had lost her key by climbing in a window for her."

"Oh, that," laughed Kathleen, dismissing the incident.

"Yes, that," said Mike. "That nice old kleptomaniac. And after she'd stripped the dean's house of everything she could cart away, I nearly got thrown out of college."

"I bailed you out, didn't I? That was absolutely hilarious—that sweet old lady!"

"I didn't think it was so hilarious at the time, though I know your friends were awfully amused."

"Oh, don't be stuffy. You don't still hold that against me, do you? I've grown up a little since then."

Mike could see that for himself, but he wasn't entirely placated. "I

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don't hold it against you, but you might say it shook my faith in your judgment of people."

"I was wrong about that little old lady, but I'm not wrong about Henry Boland. I've just come from his wake, and when I knelt over his casket I could feel his presence in that room. You must believe me! I could feel him trying to communicate with me, begging me to do something about this horrible thing that has happened to his memory."

"You've talked the ear off the living, so now you're communing with the dead," said Mike. "Kathleen Fahey, girl spiritualist."

"Call it what you like, but when you know people you can sense what they're thinking."

"Even when they're dead?"

"Being dead is just being somewhere else, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never been dead."

"Sometimes, I wonder," she said cuttingly.

Mike glared at that beautiful face of hers, shining with health and overconfidence. But no, he wouldn't lose his temper. Losing your temper is immature, and he was sure she would enjoy making him lose his temper; so he clamped his jaw tight and ignored her remark.

"At the funeral tomorrow you'll see what I mean," she continued.

"I'm not attending the funeral," he said curtly.

"Why not? You're an insurance investigator. You're supposed to be looking for clues."

"Miss Fahey!" he yelled, losing his temper in spite of himself. "You may not believe this, but I am doing my job. However, I can't do my job when I'm hounded by an hysterical woman obsessed with fantastic ideas about an imaginary murder!"

"You know your trouble, Sullivan?" she yelled back. "You've got a mediocre mind with no imagination at all!"

"I hope that is your final pronouncement for the day," he said wearily.

"All right," said Kathleen, rising. "I'll leave you to work over your silly little insurance forms, but before this is over you're going to see more of me."

Looking at that beautiful frame of hers rising before his desk, his anger subsided, and an involuntary, but predatory, grin spread over his face. He contemplated her last remark pleasantly as she turned her equally attractive posterior to him and walked imperiously out the door.

Mike did go to the funeral the next morning; he wasn't sure why. Maybe it was to see her again, but he wouldn't admit that, even to himself. The weather was ideal for a funeral—low gray clouds, a damp nasty wind. He felt miserable, an eavesdropper, but Kathleen seemed oblivious of the elements, or perhaps the dark dank day reenforced

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her feelings of mystery and foul play.

It was a small group of mourners. Boland's sister had specified a quiet private funeral; not that poor Henry had many friends to sorrow for him. In addition to Hester and Kathleen there were two old college chums of Henry's who looked as though they were about ready for the priest's ministrations themselves; George Bradley, the family attorney; Karl Stenberg, Hester's current artist-in-residence; and Henry's housekeeper, Mrs. Crowley, whose sobs were almost as loud as Hester's.

Hester really deserved a bigger audience for the performance she was putting on at the graveside. Her caterwauling nearly drowned out the words of the priest, yet Mike believed her grief was sincere. She hadn't actually expected her brother to kill himself when he was caught defrauding the insurance company. She was almost a different woman from the one he'd called on the day after the robbery, shortly after learning of Vanderwald's statement to the police that the stolen paintings were fakes.

He hadn't been able to catch Henry Boland at home that morning. His housekeeper had grudgingly informed him that her employer had left early without saying where he was going, so he tried Hester's place hoping Henry had sought refuge from the reporters at her apartment. Her pad surprised him. It was the antithesis of everything Henry cherished. His home was like a visit back to the turn of the century, a house full of the appurtenances and art objects of a proper Edwardian gentleman. Hester's was more like an LSD workshop. The walls were hung with the sort of stuff that Mike, in his cultural ignorance, referred to as the Which-End-Is-Up School.

Hester offered him a drink as she led him into the living room, but it was early, and he passed. Her clothes were a little too youthful and the cosmetics a little too thick, but she had obviously been a good-looking gal at one time, though she couldn't quite manage to look aristocratic. She looked more like the upstairs maid masquerading in her mistress's wardrobe. He didn't think the comparison would have annoyed her. She was a good-natured type and probably would have been just as happy being the butcher's wife as an aristocrat, assuming, of course, the butcher was passionate and attentive. He could tell from the appraising glance she gave him that she still had a strong interest in life, but he decided he'd pass on that too.

"What do you think of them?" she asked, indicating the canvases on the wall.

"I'm not much of an art expert," he said noncommittally.

She smiled at his diplomacy. "They're by a friend of mine, Karl Stenberg. This stuff is very popular

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today, but not very creative. Karl is a sweet boy, but he has no originality."

"I guess you can sell anything if you call it Art."

"Or steal it," she added. "I suppose that is why you've come. I don't know how I can help you. The police were here earlier looking for Henry or a recent photograph of him, but I couldn't help them either. I have no idea where he might be, and he abhorred having his picture taken. He was never much to look at. I don't think he's had a photograph taken in thirty years."

"I'm not surprised he wants a little solitude," said Mike. "I'd be pretty upset myself at losing half a million dollars."

"Poor Henry," said Hester. "And he was always so careful with his precious possessions."

"He was something of a connoisseur?" asked Mike.

"He fancied himself one," said Hester.

"Miss Boland, did your brother ever give any indication that he suspected the paintings in his collection weren't genuine?"

"No. He was always throwing brickbats at mine, but he never questioned his own. I was really shocked when I learned they were forgeries, but it's a marvelous joke on Henry. He'll never get over this."

He was shocked at her callousness, but then, he never had understood the rich. Maybe they could pass it off as a big joke, but him, he got mad when he dropped twenty bucks at the racetrack. So his interview hadn't been very fruitful. All he'd learned was that Henry didn't think much of his sister's taste and that she wasn't at all worried about his predicament . . .

He felt sorry for her this morning. She had to be supported as they walked back at the end of the service to the waiting line of cars. The others looked at her compassionately as though they were watching a somnambulist.

Kathleen approached him and his mood brightened. She looked just as beautiful in sober black. "Good morning," she said. "You decided to come after all. Maybe you are conscientious."

"I try to be," he said. "That's what my father told me when I went out into the world—be conscientious, but avoid little old ladies who lose their keys and beautiful young women who see murderers behind every canvas."

Kathleen bristled. She looked as if she was going to hit him, but the solemnity of the occasion prevented her. He was instantly sorry. She felt Henry Boland's death deeply, and he was acting like an unfeeling lout. He apologized at once and offered her a lift into town, but she wasn't in any mood to forgive him. "I'm riding in the family car," she informed him coldly, and walked off.

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George Bradley, Henry's attorney, kept him company on the drive back from the cemetery. He was a poor substitute for Kathleen, but more informative. "Is that all?" said Mike, surprised. "I assumed his estate would be much larger."

"No," answered Bradley. "Henry Boland inherited a million dollars from his parents, but over the years he gave away a great deal in anonymous donations to several charitable organizations. However, he wasn't exactly broke. He had enough to live on quite comfortably."

"Still," said Mike, "the money he stood to collect for the paintings would have come in very handy."

"I can't deny that," said Bradley. "But neither can I bring myself to believe the implications."

"What's your opinion?"

"I don't know, Mike. Henry was a gentleman, and I mean a real gentleman in everything the word implies. Also, he was extremely sensitive; he hated publicity. The ridicule of being duped out of a fortune for some worthless paintings may have preyed on his mind, and the notoriety of the insurance scandal could have driven him to suicide. That sounds rather far-fetched, but it's the only solution I can think of."

"He did apply for the insurance money," Mike reminded him.

"I know," said Bradley. "I can't explain that either. I knew Henry Boland for a great many years, but I never really knew him well. I don't think anyone did."

Mike thanked Bradley and after dropping him at the courthouse, returned to his office to catch up on his work which, despite the insinuations of Kathleen Fahey, was often difficult and always urgent. He brought out the papers on the Mansfield claim which he had been working on before the Boland robbery occurred, and tried to concentrate on them; but too many extraneous thoughts kept running through his head.

Finally, in disgust, he went downstairs to the cafeteria for a sandwich and a cup of coffee; then he got into his car and drove to the police station to keep an appointment with Lieutenant Joe Kelsey, the detective in charge of the Boland case.

When he walked into Kelsey's office, Mr. Vanderwald was already there, and the bogus canvases were scattered around the room. "Hello, Mike," said Kelsey. "Welcome to our cut-rate gallery."

"How did they turn out?"

"Not a genuine one in the lot," said Kelsey.

"Extremely good work, Mr. Sullivan," said Vanderwald. "The average person would never doubt their authenticity, but they have all been painted in the last year or two."

Vanderwald, a jolly-looking man with a gray mustache and inquisitive blue eyes behind his spectacles,

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was obviously enjoying his involvement in a major art theft.

"Do you think Boland knew all along that his paintings were fakes?" Mike asked him.

"I don't think so," said Vanderwald. "He was absolutely devastated when I told him of my suspicions, almost incoherent. He pleaded with me not to mention it to anyone until he'd had a chance to corroborate my opinion."

"And you kept quiet?"

"Naturally. The poor man had had a terrible shock. I never told a soul until I read of the robbery in the paper. Then I felt I had to come to the police or else be party to a fraud. I just can't understand it," said Vanderwald, shaking his head. "A man of his reputation."

"Did you know Boland very well?" asked Mike.

"I had never met the man before, but I knew of his collection, and I'd written him on several occasions asking for the privilege of viewing it. But he never answered my letters, which didn't surprise me, since I'd heard of his phobia for privacy."

"But you were surprised when the invitation came?"

"Quite. And I jumped at the opportunity. You can imagine how I felt, after all my anticipation, when I saw that the paintings weren't genuine."

"And you're sure you didn't mention your suspicions to anyone, not even your secretary?"

"Absolutely not," said Vanderwald. "Mr. Boland specified beforehand that my visit was to be strictly confidential. He didn't want other people badgering him for invitations."

"What about the housekeeper, Mrs. Crowley?" asked Mike.

"She goes home after supper," said Kelsey.

"Can you remember anything else, Mr. Vanderwald?" asked Mike. "Any little thing?"

"I don't think so."

"What was he doing when you arrived that night?"

"He was drinking a glass of hot brandy and lemon juice. He offered me a portion, but I declined. It didn't appear very appetizing."

"Hot brandy and lemon juice?"

"He said it was a cold remedy of his housekeeper's, and he'd always found it very effective; wrap a piece of red flannel around your head and sip hot brandy and lemon juice."

"The old girl swears by it," said Kelsey. "Said she'd been giving it to him for years."

"You know, Joe," said Mike. "If Boland decided to rob himself, after discovering he'd been taken for a pile of worthless art, and drop the bill in my company's lap, you'd think he would have done a better job of getting rid of these phony paintings. Hiding them in the cellar was pretty amateurish even for an eccentric old gentleman."

"He was too confident," said

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Kelsey. "A lot of amateurs are. Robbery seems very simple in theory—an open window, no fingerprints. It could have been any one of a dozen slick art thieves operating in the country. Your company would have paid off, and that would have been the end of it as far as he was concerned. If Mr. Vanderwald hadn't informed us the paintings were phony to begin with, we would never have suspected Boland of stealing his own stuff."

"There's always the possibility it could have been someone else," said Mike.

"There's always that possibility," said Kelsey, "but it's not too likely. Say, for instance, someone else had stolen the paintings. Why then, would they come back the next night and kill Boland? You figure that one out. And why didn't they take the paintings with them? Because they knew they were phony? If they knew they were fakes they wouldn't have stolen them in the first place."

"Uhuh," grunted Mike. He had to agree with Kelsey's reasoning, but he was still puzzled.

"After listening to Mr. Vanderwald, we went back and searched that house from top to bottom and found the forgeries hidden in the cellar, and once we'd found them and had them examined, Boland knew the game was up. So that night he shoved his pistol in his mouth and blew half his head off, which was crude but efficient."

Vanderwald turned white at Kelsey's description of the death scene, which also was crude, and retreated to the window for some fresh air. Mike felt like some fresh air too. He thanked Kelsey for his help and began to leave. "I'll do you a favor some day," he said.

"You can do it now," said Kelsey. "You know that Fahey dame, don't you? She was a friend of Boland."

"Yes, I know her."

"That woman's been bugging me for two days now, and she's outside again. Why don't you get her off my ear, Mike, before I do something I'll be sorry for?"

"I'll try," he said, but not too hopefully.

It took some doing, but he finally got her out of the station and settled in a booth in a bar across the street with a martini in front of her and a bourbon on the rocks for himself. She was feeling rotten. The bright sophisticated veneer had fallen away under the tragic impact of the last few days, revealing the bewildered sensitive girl underneath. She stared listlessly at the drink as if all her vitality had drained out of her and down into the glass before her. "What am I going to do, Mike?" she asked dejectedly. "A friend has been murdered, and nobody believes me."

He looked at her for a long time before speaking. He had to be sure about his thoughts. He had to be

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sure it wasn't just her attraction for him and his longing to hold her and comfort her. Finally he made up his mind. "I believe you," he said gently.

"Poor Henry dead in his grave and—what!" She searched his eyes, not believing his words.

"I believe you," he repeated, returning her gaze.

"You do!" He nodded. "But when?" she cried. "When did you decide?"

"When I figured out that Henry Boland didn't have any reason for killing himself."

"What about defrauding your company?"

"My company didn't have any case against him."

"They didn't?"

"No. Vanderwald says that he saw those paintings before the theft and told Henry they were forgeries; but he went to Henry's house alone that night, and Henry swore him to secrecy after he made his discovery, and Vanderwald kept that pledge until he heard about the robbery. Now, since Henry never told anyone of his visit either, Vanderwald has no proof that he has ever been in that house at all."

"That's true," she said, beginning to look more hopeful.

"So if Henry had been caught trying to defraud us, he could simply deny ever having met Vanderwald and claim that he, himself, was the innocent victim of some unscrupulous art dealers."

"But Henry Boland would never have done such a thing."

"Then it had to be someone else that night impersonating Henry—which wouldn't have been difficult, since very few people knew him."

"Somebody else? Who?"

"I don't know," said Mike. "But whoever it was, they knew a lot about Henry Boland. They knew when he'd be away and arranged a visit by Vanderwald in his absence and purposely showed him the forgeries knowing he'd recognize them for what they were. Then, they hid them in the cellar and came back later and stole the originals, certain that Vanderwald, being an honest man, would go to the police when he heard of the robbery and tell them that Boland was attempting to defraud my company out of a half million dollars."

Kathleen looked at him eagerly, excited at his revelations. "Why don't we go to Lieutenant Kelsey and tell him all this?" she asked.

"We haven't any proof. We haven't even got a suspect. All we have is a theory. So far, whoever did it has committed the perfect crime. Boland is dead and buried, and everyone believes he was a cheat who took his own life."

"I know," said Kathleen, looking glum again. "Even Hester, his own sister, believes it."

"How is Hester?"

"Not very well. I'm going over there now to help out. Karl is with her, and Mr. Bradley is coming over

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later to discuss the provisions of the will, but she needs another woman around at a time like this. I don't know what she'll do when she finds out Henry was murdered."

"Murder is always a hard thing to believe. Especially when it is someone close to you."

"I know. But when I tell them what you said, they'll have to believe it."

"It'll take more than words to convince them."

He drove her to Hester's apartment building and watched her retreating figure as she walked into the lobby. She had perked up remarkably. It made him feel a lot better, but they were still in the middle of nowhere, he reminded himself. They needed proof. He put the car into gear and headed downtown.

He made a tour of several of the minor art galleries in the city—places where the customers were often more exotic than the canvases they came to view. The proprietors were helpful, once he'd grasped their idiom and translated it into his everyday English. He soon learned what he wanted and returned to his office. He sat at his desk a long time, sorting out his thoughts, before picking up the phone and dialing Kelsey at police headquarters.

At first Kelsey laughed and turned him down cold; but they'd been friends for a long time, and Mike was persuasive. Finally, after explaining again what he planned to do, he secured the detective's reluctant agreement.

Next, he called Kathleen at Hester's apartment. A man's voice—probably Stenberg's, he assumed—answered the phone and fetched Kathleen. "Hello, honey," he said.

"Hello, Mike."

"Do you remember telling me about Henry's picture?"

"Henry's picture?"

"The miniature he gave your aunt. Do you still have it?"

"Oh, that. Yes. It's still hanging in Aunt Nora's bedroom."

"When did he give it to her?"

"About a year and a half ago. Why?"

"It's just a portrait, isn't it?"

"Just the head and face. Why are you so interested in it?"

"Mr. Vanderwald wants to see it."

"Vanderwald! What does he want to see it for?"

"Don't ask questions. I'll explain later. Now, you're sure it's the only one in existence?"

"Yes, I'm sure—Henry told me so."

"Fine. I want you to do exactly what I say. Okay?"

"All right, Mike."

"Don't say a word to anyone about this, but meet me right away at my office."

"At your office, and mum's the word."

"How soon can you be here?"

"Twenty minutes."

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"Great. Now remember, not a word to anyone. That's important. And come straight here."

"Okay. I'll leave now."

He waited for her to hang up and jumped quickly from his chair. He hated being such a heel, but it was necessary. If she only follows instructions, he prayed silently. He left the office door unlocked, hurried downstairs, and drove off to meet Kelsey.

Kathleen left Hester's immediately and went directly to Mike's office, but he wasn't there. She sat down to wait. After fifteen minutes she became impatient; after half an hour she was furious. It was too late to return to Hester's, so she took a cab home.

When the taxi turned into her street, she noticed two police cars parked in front of her house. She paid the cabbie and ran up the walk, but a policeman at the open door blocked her path. Before she could tell off the conscientious officer, Mike rescued him and escorted her into the hall.

"What are you doing here?" cried Kathleen. "What's going on?" As she stared around at the confusion in her living room, her eye caught sight of one of her Aunt Nora's quilts spread over a shapeless form at the foot of the stairs. "What's that?" she asked.

"That," said Mike, "is your murderer, Karl Stenberg."

"Stenberg! But I just left him an hour ago at Hester's!"

"And he left right after you and came straight here," said Mike.

"Stenberg killed Henry?"

"That's right," said Kelsey.

"But what's he doing here?"

"Looking for a photograph of Henry Boland that he was afraid I was going to show to Vanderwald," said Mike.

"There aren't any photographs of Henry. What made him think I had one?"

"You did when I talked to you on the phone earlier." Kathleen looked at him completely confused. "A guilty mind eavesdropping on our conversation about the Martino miniature that Henry gave to your aunt could easily have jumped to the conclusion that we were discussing a photograph of Boland."

"Why, you were using me as a guinea pig!"

"Why not?" said Mike. "You're the girl who cried murder."

The following evening Mike got his reward. He figured shrewdly that candlelight and wine at a fancy bistro wouldn't impress Kathleen—she'd been raised on that scene; so he brought over some steaks and beer and char-coaled their dinner on her patio—a much better idea than a restaurant, and no nosey waiters to intrude on their privacy.

Kathleen hadn't completely recovered from the shock of yesterday and was in a pensive mood. "Poor Hester," she said. "I still can't believe it."

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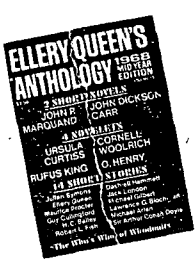
"As far as Hester was concerned, it all started as a huge prank," said Mike. "Henry was too perfect. He was contemptuous of her dabblings in art, supercilious about her paintings. He'd annoyed her for years. She thought it would be a great joke when Stenberg suggested duplicating Henry's collection and making a fool of him. She was right about Stenberg. He didn't have much originality, but he was a damn fine copiest. But he was also a poor boy, and he wasn't about to give up half a million dollars worth of art; and after Henry's death, which Hester honestly thought was suicide, she didn't dare speak out. She felt responsible for her brother's death."

"But why did Karl have to kill Henry?"

"He had to after impersonating him in front of Vanderwald. He couldn't afford to let the real Henry come face to face with Vanderwald, and he assumed that everyone would believe Boland had killed himself because he'd been caught trying to defraud my company."

"I almost wish I hadn't insisted Henry had been murdered," said Kathleen.

"That's the gamble in searching for the truth. Sometimes it's hard to find, and sometimes finding it is hard to accept. Then again," he said, slipping his arm around her waist, "sometimes finding the truth can be marvelous."



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Nick Velvet is an unusual thief—because he steals only the unusual. Never anything as prosaic as money, as commonplace as jewels or stocks and bonds. In one theft (not yet chronicled) he stole a complete baseball team, including manager, coaches, and equipment. In another (also unchronicled) he stole thousands of theater tickets to a Broadway play that had been closed for months. In the September 1966 issue of EQMM he stole a live tiger from a city zoo in broad daylight. In the June 1967 issue of EQMM he stole all the water from a swimming pool. And now Nick Velvet accepts $20,000 (his minimum fee) to steal a toy mechanical mouse that retails for 98 cents . . .

THE THEFT OF THE TOY MOUSE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"I'M GOING TO PARIS," NICK VELVET told Gloria one evening, as they sat on the porch drinking beer and listening to the vague rumblings of distant summer thunder.

"Oh, Nicky! When?"

"The end of the week. I've been commissioned by a big film processor to find a good plant location for them in northern France. Chances are I'll be over there about a week."

"Nicky, do you think I could go with you? I've never been to Paris. I've never been anywhere!"

He could almost see her features in the nervous glow of her cigarette—her eyes wide, and anxious as a child's. "You know I couldn't take you along, Gloria. But I'll be back. I always come back, don't I?"

"Yes."

"And I'll bring you something. A bottle of French perfume."

"Will you, Nicky?"

"Sure," he promised. The thunder was nearer, but it didn't bother him. He was already thinking about the job in Paris.

This time the assignment had come to him through the mail, along with a certified check for $20,000. The letter was from a man who called himself J. Orchid, and that was the name signed on the check. "Please consider the enclosed certified check as total payment for the theft of one toy mouse, as described herein, which is at present being used as a prop in the filming of an American motion picture, *Any Losers?*, on a sound stage in Paris, France. Once the theft has been accomplished, not later than Monday, August 1st, you should remain in your room at the Empire Hotel in Paris until contacted about disposition of the mouse."

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That was all of it, except for a picture of the thing clipped from a toy catalogue. It showed a little wind-up metal mouse, about four inches long, that apparently ran around in circles. It was made in Japan, and sold for 98 cents in this country. Nick looked at the $20,000 check again. $20,000 for a 98-cent toy mouse! The check seemed genuine enough. He wasn't in the habit of doing business through the mail, but it seemed he could make an exception in this case.

It seemed he would have to, for there was no return address for Mr. J. Orchid. The letter had come to the box number Nick used for his business activities, and he could only suppose that the address had been passed on by one of his satisfied customers. The money could not be returned, and Nick would never keep it without fulfilling the assignment. Besides, he'd stolen stranger things than a toy mouse in his time—things like a live tiger from a city zoo in broad daylight, and all the water from a swimming pool. He was a specialist in the theft of the unusual. For $20,000 he would steal anything unusual—even a 98-cent mechanical mouse.

Nick Velvet flew to Paris on Friday morning, trading a New York heat wave for the splendid breezes of Paris in July. The city already was surrendering itself to the traditional month-long siesta that was August. The streets were relatively uncrowded, and signs were already appearing in shop windows and office doorways announcing the annual holiday period. Frenchmen would head south, for the most part, leaving the city in the grip of tourists and the coming heat.

But for Nick it was good to be back, good to watch the barges along the Seine and wander through the Left Bank bars where summer never came. By Saturday morning he knew all about the American film company that was in Paris shooting *Any Losers?* The picture was a Fleming-Archer Production, directed by a young Canadian named Lee Fitzwright, and starring Carol Young—a new starlet in the midst of a typical Hollywood press buildup. But the name that most interested Nick Velvet among the film's credits was that of Mary Karls, who was in charge of props.

On Saturday evening Nick arranged to meet Mary Karls at a restaurant in Montmartre where she was dining with some of the cast. She was a woman in her late thirties, only a few years younger than Nick himself, but there was still about her a lingering aura of past glamor.

"Are you in the film they're shooting?" he asked, when he caught her alone at the bar.

She turned on him with a questioning smile. "No. What makes you ask that?"

He smiled and lit her cigarette. "I

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recognized Carol Young in your party."

"Oh, yes. She's very beautiful, isn't she?" Mary Karls settled down beside him, and he wasn't surprised. She'd had just enough to drink to be interested, and interesting. "She's worth a million dollars to Fleming-Archer Productions, and some day she may be one of the biggest stars in Hollywood."

"You work with her?"

The woman nodded. "Prop girl, I guess you'd call me. A thankless task, but I get screen credit, at least. I was a script girl at Paramount once."

"You must have been on the screen."

She smiled at him through the cigarette smoke. "Once, when I was twenty-two. It was one of the last big Hollywood musicals—a picture called *Bright Waves Tomorrow*. I thought it was the beginning of a glorious career. My part on screen lasted exactly thirty-five seconds."

He ordered her a drink and introduced himself belatedly. "Nick Velvet's my name. I do industrial development work. Picking plant sites, mostly."

"Pleased to meet you, Nick." She glanced down at the drink. "But I'm a very frank girl. I don't want you to think you're buying any more than the drink."

He smiled. "And some conversation. I'm just a lonely American in Paris, but my intentions are honorable."

"Good. Then we understand each other." The rest of her party was leaving, and she went over to say a few words to them. Carol Young, looking like a beautiful blonde child, glanced in Nick's direction, then quickly away when she saw that he was watching her. She seemed to be with an older man whom Nick guessed was the film's director, Lee Fitzwright.

After they had departed, Mary Karls returned to the bar stool next to him. "They're off to another bar. I might as well stay here. I want to get home early anyway."

"Home?"

"The hotel. You know. I have to start work at six thirty."

"How's the picture coming?"

"Good. It's beginning to take shape."

"I don't even know what it's about," Nick said.

"Remember *Lili*? About fifteen years ago? It's the same sort of thing. Lonely little girl growing up in Paris, with no friends and no playthings except a toy mouse that runs in circles when it's wound up. Our director thinks it's a symbol of modern life."

"Carol Young is the lonely little girl?"

"She's sixteen at the start, but she blossoms. You know Hollywood. She gets involved with some of the jet-set gambling crowd."

"And she plays with a toy mouse?"

Mary Karls nodded.

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"Where you shooting?" He tried to sound casual.

"A big sound stage just outside of town. We rented it from Cintfilm. Of course we're doing the usual Eiffel Tower exteriors, and some other spots around Paris. In three weeks we go back to Hollywood to finish the interiors."

"Do you have a room where you keep the props?"

"On the sound stage? Sure. I have to lock everything up at night, although they have a watchman and a burglar alarm. Nothing worth stealing anyway. It's a great place to shoot, though. Skylights all across the ceiling. Lots of natural light. Though sometimes we have to cover them over when the weather isn't right for the scene we're doing. All the dressing rooms and supply rooms are just little cubicles with walls and no ceiling. We had to put a canvas over Carol's room because she was afraid some reporters would get up on the roof and take a picture of her through the skylight."

"I'd like to come out and see it sometime."

"Our producer, Mr. Archer, is dead against visitors to the set. Otherwise I'd invite you. He's behind schedule already, and he's afraid of any sort of delay."

Nick sipped his drink. "How about another? These taste pretty good."

"Sorry. My hotel is calling to me. It's been fun, though, just talking to someone besides that crowd all the time." She eyed him suspiciously. "I just had a thought. You're not a reporter, are you?"

"Heavens, no! Do I look like one?"

"Well, no," she admitted.

"Do you know a fellow named J. Orchid? Connected with the movie business."

"Jason! You know Jason Orchid?"

"I've just heard the name."

"My God, he threatened to kill Mr. Fleming and Mr. Archer, our producers. He claims he wrote the original screenplay for *Any Losers?* and they stole it from him. He's a real nut."

"Is he in Paris?"

"I hope not!" She gathered up her cigarettes and purse. "But I really have to be going now, Mr. Velvet. Thank you for the drink, and the conversation."

"Thank you, Miss Karls." He walked her to the door and saw that she got a taxi back to her hotel. Then he strolled for a time along the river, thinking about the toy mouse that ran around in circles.

The Cintfilm sound stage which had been leased by Fleming-Archer Productions was a great gray hulk of a building, and Nick Velvet quickly confirmed that it had both burglar alarm and resident watchman. He could not reach the watchman without tripping the alarm, and he could not tamper with the

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alarm system without first disposing of the watchman. It was a simple but foolproof setup.

Nick made it to the roof with little effort and looked down through the wired-glass skylight at a mass of darkened interior. He had no idea which was the room he sought, or where the mechanical mouse might be inside that room. He had pressed Mary Karls as far as he could without exciting her suspicions. Now he turned his attention to the skylight. In addition to a wire mesh inside the glass, each pane was equipped with a silvered border connected to the alarm system. And none of the sections of the skylight opened. There'd be no entry this way. But at least he might learn where he was headed.

Working quickly with a diamond-tipped glass cutter, he lifted a one-inch circle from the glass, careful not to disturb the wire mesh or the alarm tape. Then he took a small ball bearing from his pocket and let it drop through the hole, holding his breath until it hit, bounced, and clattered along the floor. Carefully he slid back to the edge of the skylight and waited. Almost instantly the place was flooded with light and the watchman came to investigate the noise of the bearing.

It had rolled off somewhere out of sight, and the tiny hole did not show in the mesh window. The watchman walked back and forth, puzzled, while Nick quickly mapped the floor area in his mind. The sound stage, about forty feet below, camera booms reaching almost to the skylight, microphones, banks of powerful lights, a retractable canvas to cover the skylight, and the row of little walled cubicles that served as dressing rooms. He spotted the covered one that would be Carol Young's room, then let his eyes wander over the rest. Costumes, hairdresser, makeup—a layout quite primitive by the usual Hollywood standards.

Then he saw it, a room cluttered with odd pieces of furniture, lamps, pictures. Set decoration, in the trade term—or simply props. Surely the toy mouse would be there. Somewhere near, because they would probably be using it on Monday.

But he couldn't see it, even with the aid of the miniature monocular that was part of his equipment.

Nowhere.

And the watchman was already walking back toward the light switch, ready to plunge the place into its slumbering darkness.

Nick watched the scene go suddenly black beneath him with a feeling of utter frustration. The mouse must be in a box, under something else, impossible to spot from above.

And yet there was no way for him to gain entrance to the building. A frontal assault, and damn the alarms, would have brought the police before he'd have time to locate his objective.

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He slid off the roof and hit the ground feet first, with knees bent. All right, now what?

His frown turned slowly to a smile as he saw the warm glow of a public telephone booth halfway down the block.

In a moment he'd found Cintfilm and dialed the number. The voice of the watchman, gruff and sleepy, answered in English. "This is Lee Fitzwright," Nick said, muffling his words. "I want you to check something for me. Unlock the prop room and make certain the toy mouse is there."

"What?" the man mumbled. "I don't know no mouse. I guard the place."

"In the prop room. It's the end room on the right. The mouse is a little metal thing about four inches long. Take it out of its box and leave it on the table. I want to be certain it's there. Come back and tell me."

"I can't do that. I'm not supposed to touch things."

"It's very important to me. I'll make it worth your while tomorrow."

A hesitation. "I don't know."

"Did anything strange happen there tonight? Any noise?"

"Yes, there was something."

"Go and check, then! I must know!"

A sigh. "All right. Hold on."

But Nick was already sprinting from the phone booth back to where his rope still dangled from the roof. Above him he saw the glow from the lights as it hit the sky. Then he was in position again, in time to see the watchman unlocking the prop-room door. The watchman puttered around a bit, looking here and there, until finally he opened a small box and revealed the mouse. After studying it for a moment he put it back in its box, but left the lid off. All right, Nick breathed; good enough.

The watchman went back to the dead telephone, leaving the lights on. Finally he came back, shaking his head, and locked the prop-room door. He turned out the lights, and the place was in darkness again.

Now Nick worked swiftly. He edged out over the skylight until he was above the prop room. It was difficult to be certain in the dark, and he had to risk a quick flash of his flashlight to make sure. Yes, the mouse was directly under him, about forty feet below.

Another tiny circle of glass came carefully out, then a small but powerful magnet dropped through at the end of a vinyl fishing line. The line was safe—unbreakable and almost invisible, even if the watchman returned. He only prayed the mouse was made of a ferrous metal.

It wasn't.

After ten minutes of grappling he knew the magnet wouldn't work. Not by itself. He pulled it carefully up and added a glob of sticky adhesive, then lowered it very

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much like a boy fishing coins up through a grating with chewing gum. This time he felt the contact almost immediately. A quick flash of his light told him that the mouse was hooked.

A few moments later, when he'd pulled it up to the glass skylight, he carefully cut a slightly larger hole, snipping the wire mesh in two places. Reaching through with his fingers, he turned the mouse and eased it out by its head. The hole was still only about two inches in diameter.

He smiled as he held it in his hand. Then he turned the key in its underside and watched the little wheels spin. The mechanical mouse was his. He'd earned Jason Orchid's $20,000.

The theft had taken place on Sunday evening, and by Monday afternoon the English-language papers had the story on page one. *Cat Burglar Steals Mouse!* one headlined, and Nick chuckled. They'd found the hole almost immediately, and deduced the rest of it. Since the mouse had already been used in some scenes, it was essential to obtain an identical one before filming could be resumed—and this particular type was not sold in France. A substitute would have to be flown from New York. The co-producer, Archer, had phoned his partner Fleming in Manhattan to get one on the earliest plane. The article concluded with a detailed rundown on the recent financial reverses of Fleming-Archer Productions.

Nick read it all and then wound up the little mouse and let it run in circles on the coffee table. He relaxed in his hotel room all day, waiting for word from Orchid.

By evening nothing had happened. He began to wonder if anything would. Why pay him $20,000 to steal a toy mouse that Orchid didn't even want? But the answer now seemed obvious to Nick. Orchid simply wanted to delay the production, adding to the producers' financial woes. Mary Karls had told him of Orchid's enmity, his threat to kill both Fleming and Archer.

When the mouse ran down for the hundredth time after midnight, Nick put it away and went to bed. He'd give Orchid till tomorrow noon to show up. Then he was checking out, mouse and all, and heading home.

He slept well, as he always did when he was traveling, and in the morning he paused only to look out at the early morning mists off the Seine. Then he packed his small suitcase and prepared to depart. There was no need to wait even until noon. The feel of the whole job was somehow wrong.

And there was no point in taking the mechanical mouse with him. He glanced around the hotel room for a likely hiding place, and finally settled on a convenient space in the back of the television cabinet, where

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it wouldn't be found until the next time the set was repaired.

He picked up his bag, stepped into the hall, closed the door behind him, and faced two slender young men with badges already in their hands.

"Monsieur Velvet? Paris police. Please accompany us for questioning."

At one time it had been the Sûreté. Now it was simply Paris Police Headquarters, an aging but imposing building that seemed constantly in a flux of activity. Nick Velvet sat on a straight-backed wooden chair and answered uncertain questions with vague answers. It was not his first encounter with the police, and he knew at once that they were unsure of themselves.

"The mouse," one of them said. "Where is it?"

"I know of no mouse."

"We have a copy of a letter, sent to us anonymously. In it a man named Orchid hired you to steal the toy mouse."

"Then you only have to prove I really did take it. You haven't found it yet, have you?"

The Inspector, an utterly patient man named Philippe, sighed and got to his feet. "We have not found the mouse," he admitted. "Come with me. We will drive out to Cintfilm and see if they wish to press charges. I cannot tie up my entire department over a crime so petty as this—a five-franc toy!"

And so Nick traveled once more to the sprawling sound stage on the city's outskirts. This time he entered through the door and confronted a milling group of confused people. He recognized Carol Young at once, despite the white peasant girl's costume she wore and the change in her hair styling. Mary Karls was nowhere in sight, and he was at least thankful for that.

"Is this the man, Inspector?" someone asked, stepping forward. He was a tall man with ash-gray hair, whom Nick hadn't seen in the Saturday night group.

The Inspector nodded. "This is Nick Velvet, Monsieur Archer."

The producer nodded and turned to Nick. "That nut Orchid paid you to steal the mouse, didn't he?"

"I've never met anyone by that name," Nick answered truthfully.

The director, Fitzwright, joined the group. "If we're going to keep to any sort of schedule, I have to get those cameras rolling."

Mary Karls had followed the director from an inner office, and she gave a little gasp when she recognized Nick. She seemed about to speak, but then thought better of it and turned to Archer. "We're ready for the mouse scene, if it's arrived."

The producer nodded and went into his office. "It was just delivered. Fleming must have gotten it on the first plane." He returned in a minute with a small slim package not yet unwrapped.

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"I'll take it," Mary said.

"Wait." Archer still had the package in his hand. "Fitz, let's have Carol open it and get a picture for the papers. It'll make great publicity. After all, it's her mouse in the film."

The director called to somebody and in a few moments a camera was produced. They'd all but forgotten Nick's presence, and he could have walked away without being missed. But instead he was staring at the little package, at the neat row of air-mail stamps and the label addressed to Archer. There was something . . .

"How's this?" Carol Young asked, posing prettily as she began to tear off the wrapper.

"Great," Archer said. "Snap it while I make a phone call."

"Then we get to work," Fitzwright reminded them.

Inspector Philippe cleared his throat. "I wish to know whether you will press charges against Monsieur Velvet."

Carol Young ripped away the last of the paper and started to open the box. Then Nick Velvet moved, more on instinct than anything else. He threw himself at the girl, knocking the little box from her hand and sending it sliding across the studio floor.

Already the Inspector was reaching for his gun, and Carol Young had started to scream. Archer turned in the office doorway and started back.

"Don't anybody touch it," Nick said. "There just might be a bomb in it."

Some time later Inspector Philippe faced them with a sad and drawn face. "You were quite correct, Monsieur Velvet. The little box contained a bomb which would have exploded two seconds after the lid was opened. Now you can tell us how you knew that."

Nick relaxed against the wall with a cigarette. "It was only a guess. I noticed there was no customs declaration on the package—only the label and stamps. Even if it could have reached here so quickly, it would have had to pass through customs. If the package did not come from Mr. Fleming in New York, it was at least a good possibility that it came from the mysterious Jason Orchid, whom I understand threatened to kill Fleming and Archer. A bomb was my first guess, and it was correct."

"It could have killed Carol!" Archer gasped.

The Inspector stepped forward. "I fear, Monsieur Velvet, that you are now an accessory to an attempted murder."

Nick smiled slightly. "I believe you'd have a difficult time proving that, even if Mr. Archer wanted to press charges."

"What's that mean?" the producer asked.

"Could I speak to you alone?"

Archer looked annoyed, then

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waved Inspector Philippe and the others from the room. "What's on your mind, Velvet?" he asked after the door was closed.

"I'll make it fast, Mr. Archer. Someone sent the Paris police a copy of Orchid's letter to me. Obviously that someone must have been the sender of the letter, and just as obviously it wouldn't have been Orchid. Wherever he is, Jason Orchid has been made the fall guy for this whole business."

"What?"

"The fall guy. He couldn't possibly have planned it all. He couldn't have known, for instance, that you'd ask Fleming to send you another toy mouse by air mail. It would have been much more logical to postpone those scenes till you got back to Hollywood to shoot the rest of the interiors. No, only you—and possibly Fleming—knew what action you'd take when the mouse was stolen."

"You mean I tried to kill myself?"

"Not at all. You tried to kill Miss Carol Young."

"That's insane!"

"Is it? A rising young actress, yes, but not yet famous enough to pay her own way. You'd naturally have a big insurance policy on her for the period of the filming—say, a cool million dollars. Carol Young dead—or even badly injured—would be worth more to you at this stage of her career than even the finished picture. And one million dollars would pull Fleming-Archer Productions out of its current financial difficulties."

"Can you prove any of this?"

"A dozen people saw you hand her the box and then walk quickly away when she started to open it. To make a phone call. To whom, Mr. Archer? To your New York partner, or wasn't he in on it? Of course you made the bomb at this end, so you're the one who'll take the rap."

Archer pressed both hands against the desk top and stared down at them. "What do you intend to do?"

Nick Velvet smiled. "I intend to sell the toy mouse back to you for $20,000."

"Why, that's—"

"Now, now, no ugly words, Mr. Archer. Besides, it's the only choice you have. And if I hear of any injury to Miss Young before you finish the picture—even a splinter in her finger—you won't even have that choice."

That evening at the airport, as they were announcing his flight, Nick Velvet suddenly remembered the perfume he'd promised Gloria. He chose the most expensive bottle in the airport shop, and then bought two because he could afford it.

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A classical gambit: man vs. man (in this instance, magician vs. detective), with a "manipulator" having arranged the "entertainment" in the grandiose manner of the wealthy "crime connoisseur." Wrenn was an escape artist worthy of Houdini's reputation; Bedloe was a determined, dogged manhunter; and Grauscher, the dilettante thrill-seeker, was a man who took infinite pains to assuage his worldly ennui . . .

THE ZARETSKI CHAIN

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

"A PRIVATE DETECTIVE ON ONE SIDE, a magician on the other!" exclaimed Geoffrey Grauscher with a smile. "I consider myself fortunate indeed that both of you have seen fit to share my humble meal."

Pushing his chair back from the long table, Grauscher stared at the remains of the excellent dinner which he and his two companions had just finished. "And I understand you've been at each other's throats—figuratively speaking, of course—for the past ten years," he continued. "I expect the conversation this evening to positively crackle."

For a few seconds there was no sound but the muted roar of waves breaking on the beach below the huge house. Then the man on Grauscher's left shifted slightly in his chair. In the darkness—the table was lit only by four candles—the man's head seemed at first glance to be floating in mid-air a couple of feet above the arms of the chair. The illusion was perfect until it was realized that the man was dressed in a tuxedo which had been hand-tailored to emphasize the narrow hips and well-muscled chest and shoulders of a body in which its owner took exceptional pride. The tuxedo, of course, was black, but strangely enough the shirt-front, starched and immaculately clean, was also black, as were the cuff links and the studs.

The effect was distinctly theatrical, which was hardly surprising. Lyle Wrenn, escape artist extraordinary, knew the advantages of making an impressive appearance.

"Mr. Grauscher," said Wrenn, "you and I are men of the world. I accepted your invitation to dinner this evening because you promised me a unique challenge in the art of escape. But really, what could the two of us possibly have in common with this—this second-rate private detective who has made a mania of trying to convict me of a crime?"

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"Go to hell, Wrenn." The third man, Roy Bedloe, wore a cheap, wrinkled business suit. A former detective lieutenant in the city's police department, Bedloe had recently gone into business for himself. "I came here because Mr. Grauscher hired me," he said. "But if I'd known you'd be here, I'd have turned down the job."

"Oh, really?" One of Lyle Wrenn's eyebrows arched sardonically. "So you came for a day's pay and a free meal? You really aren't here to catch me in some larcenous endeavor? I'm hurt, Mr. Bedloe."

Bedloe let out a roar like a wounded bull, leaned across the table, and struck out angrily at Wrenn with a massive fist. The magician merely moved his chair back a few inches and laughed scornfully at the man he was tormenting.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen. Please." Geoffrey Grauscher rapped the edge of the table with his finger ring, and his two guests subsided. "It's not that I don't enjoy a good argument," he rumbled. "On several occasions disagreements among my guests have degenerated into fisticuffs." He smiled as if savoring a pleasant memory, then waved an admonishing finger at Bedloe and Wrenn. "But not now. Suppose we have our brandy and conduct ourselves in a civilized manner—at least, for the time being."

Grauscher rang a small bell which was near his plate. Through the doorway behind him came a slender youth dressed in a servant's white uniform. He whisked away the used dishes, poured brandy into three balloon glasses, and presented each of the men with a green-wrapped cigar. After lighting the cigars, the servant quietly withdrew.

"Tell me, Mr. Grauscher," said Bedloe, "why did you ask us to come here tonight? Up until I got your phone call yesterday, I had never heard of you."

"Much as I dislike being in agreement with Mr. Bedloe on any subject, I must admit he's asked the same question that has been puzzling me," said Wrenn. "To me you offered a challenge and to Bedloe, a job. Having appealed to the curiosity of one and the cupidity of the other, you got us to your house. Why?"

"No beating around the bush, eh?" said Grauscher. "Men of action, both of you. How I envy you. I've always been more partial to being a spectator than a participant."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Bedloe. "Get to the point."

"The point," answered Grauscher, "is that I'm fighting a continuing battle against boredom. Gentlemen, look about you. This house is one of seven I own throughout the world. The plates you ate from this evening are the finest Sèvres china. The paintings on the wall would have a place of honor in any museum in the country. One bottle of the brandy you're drink-

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ing would cost you a week's income, Mr. Bedloe. Financially, I am what you call 'loaded.' Still, I'm bored.

"The activities usually associated with the rich leave me with ennui. I've tried traveling with the jet set and experienced only a feeling of utter exhaustion. Sports leave me cold; the idea of dashing about like a man who's lost his mind merely in order to move a ball of some kind from here to there is repulsive to me. Even feminine companionship, at my age, has no novelty."

"A pity—especially that bit about feminine companionship," said Wrenn. "But you still haven't answered our question. Why are we here?"

"The one activity I still find extremely entrancing is the observation of human beings in moments of stress," continued Grauscher. "I am, if you will, an avid student of human nature. I'm in the habit of inviting, from time to time, pairs of individuals whose relations have become—shall we say, 'strained.' I then afford myself a small amount of pleasure by watching their reactions to certain proposals of mine."

"And just what 'proposal' do you have in mind for us?" asked Wrenn.

Grauscher turned slightly in his chair and called for the servant. "Philip! Bring me the file on Mr. Bedloe and Mr. Wrenn."

Almost immediately the youth appeared and handed a large manila envelope to Grauscher.

"During the past year," said Grauscher, "I've had a considerable amount of research done on both of you. It's surprising the things one can discover if he's willing to pay for the information. I believe I know more about the two of you than any other person in the world, perhaps including yourselves.

"For example you, Mr. Wrenn, have an obsessive desire to become a more famous escape artist than the great Houdini. You have accepted any escape challenge offered to you, and you've invariably been able to get out of whatever device you were locked, strapped, tied, or otherwise immobilized in. Unfortunately, your chosen field hasn't always paid too well. You've had to resort to other means of financing your performances and publicity. Some of these means have not always been within the law. And that's where you come into the picture, Mr. Bedloe."

Grauscher reached into the envelope and drew out several sheets of paper clipped together. "I find that you, Mr. Bedloe, have been pursuing Mr. Wrenn for the last ten years with an almost pathological intensity to convict him of one of his crimes. It began when you were a policeman assigned to patrol a carnival at which Wrenn did a trunk-escape act."

"Yeah, he'd get out of a locked trunk and then appear at the rear of the audience," said Bedloe. "The trouble was, he'd pick the pockets

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of four or five of the audience before anybody knew he was there. I arrested him, but the case was thrown out for lack of evidence. That gave me the first black mark I ever had on my record. I swore at the time I'd nail Wrenn if it was the last thing I ever did."

"A natural reaction," said Grauscher. "So for ten years now you've spent an inordinate amount of your time trying to 'nail' Mr. Wrenn. And the results were—"

"Completely unsuccessful," said Wrenn. "I not only don't have a black mark on my record, I don't even have a record."

"The most recent incident between you two," Grauscher went on smoothly, "was featured in the newspapers. The article was what first brought you to my attention. I believe that was your final official act as a member of the police force, Mr. Bedloe."

Wrenn nodded knowingly. "Oh, yes," he said with a smile. "It was that counterfeiting affair, Bedloe. Remember? For some reason you seemed to think I had a hundred-dollar bill that had never seen the inside of a Federal mint."

"Yeah, I remember," growled Bedloe. "All I needed was that one bill, and I'd have had a case that even you couldn't have escaped from."

"Tell me the details, Mr. Bedloe," suggested Grauscher.

"Me and my boys broke in fast and grabbed Wrenn so's he wouldn't have time to swallow the bill or something like that. I watched him, and the rest searched the apartment. Then we all searched Wrenn. We went over him and those rooms for three hours and didn't find the evidence. What did you do with that bill, Wrenn? That raid cost me my job, so I figure I've got a right to know."

"You don't expect me to admit I had it, do you? Especially in front of a witness. If you'll recall, though, I had the devil's own time keeping my cigarette lit. It tasted terrible, too—more like rolled-up paper than tobacco. But I smoked it clear down to the end. You even handed me an ashtray to put the stub in."

"You mean you rolled that bill up in cigarette paper and burned it—right in front of me? Why, I ought—"

"Please, Mr. Bedloe, control yourself," said Grauscher. "At any rate, the newspaper article piqued my curiosity. I began my research, and as a result I am now enjoying the pleasure of your company."

"A few minutes ago you mentioned a proposal," said Wrenn.

"Yes, of course," said Grauscher. "I had in mind a kind of contest, the winner to receive a prize—one that will please him more than anything else in the world."

"A contest?"

"Yes. You, Mr. Wrenn, will be given a problem in the art of escape. If you fail to make your escape, or if Mr. Bedloe is a good

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enough detective to deduce how you accomplished it, I will present him with sufficient evidence to see that you are sent to prison for the next seven years."

"Evidence?" said Wrenn, mildly surprised. "What evidence could you possibly have?"

"Four months ago, Mr. Wrenn," replied Grauscher, "the Bel-Rae Cosmetics Company was robbed of more than $20,000. You committed that robbery. You had two accomplices, one of whom has since died. You came to the front gate in a tan 1962 Ford panel truck. Your two assistants helped hoist you over the fence, after which you went straight to the utilities building where you cut off the burglar alarm by removing a fuse. You wore gloves at the time—rubber gloves of the type surgeons use. When you found the safe containing the money you had to try three times before you succeeded in opening it. Shall I give you further details, Mr. Wrenn?"

Lyle Wrenn's eyes were wide with surprise. "You can prove this?"

"I have a motion picture of the entire operation, taken automatically from the moment you touched the fence," said Grauscher. "You see, I own the Bel-Rae plant, and I put hidden cameras in to protect my investment."

Grauscher turned to Bedloe. "To sweeten the pot," he said to the detective, "and to provide you with an added incentive for playing my little game, I will give you $5,000 the moment either Mr. Wrenn admits failure or you convince me that you know how he made his escape."

"You keep that kind of money lying around the house?" asked Bedloe. "What happens if Wrenn decides to—"

"Oh, it's perfectly safe. The vault in which I keep my valuables is next to Philip's quarters."

"That kid? What could he do to stop—"

"In spite of his slender build Philip is well-schooled in the art of hand-to-hand combat, Mr. Bedloe."

"I used to be quite a boxer myself," Wrenn commented.

"And in the ring I'm sure you'd defeat Philip quite handily," said Grauscher. "But using the tactics he has been trained for, he could incapacitate or even kill you in less than thirty seconds. I don't think my money is in any danger of being stolen."

"Aren't you forgetting something in this 'game' of yours, Mr. Grauscher?" asked Wrenn.

"What's that?"

"What happens if I win—if I escape and Bedloe can't tell you how I did it? What's my reward?"

"The film in which you play such a stellar role. Furthermore, the fact that you escaped will make you world-famous in your profession."

"And what am I supposed to escape from?"

Grauscher leaned toward the magician, his eyes glittering in the can-

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dlelight. "The Zaretski Chain," he said slowly.

Bedloe watched Wrenn's composure drop like a discarded cloak. "The Zaretski Chain—you know where it is?" whispered the magician.

"Wait a minute!" Bedloe held up his hand like a traffic policeman signaling a car to stop. "What's this about Zaretski's chain or whatever it is?"

"Anton Zaretski," said Wrenn, a tremor in his voice, "was one of the greatest escape artists in Europe. Oh, he used the standard tricks—escaping from a strait jacket and so on—but his specialty was the chain escape.

"Zaretski had a chain made of the hardest steel. It took three different keys to unlock the cuffs at the two ends. That chain was examined by every lock expert on the continent, and there was positively nothing phony about it. They all signed statements that once those cuffs were locked nothing in the world could open them except the three keys.

"During his act Zaretski would get into a huge glass tank with a metal bottom. Members of the audience would strip him, and once they even X-rayed him to make sure he didn't have anything concealed that could pick the locks. Then they'd run the chain through an iron loop welded to the bottom of the tank and fasten the cuffs around Zaretski's wrists. Afterwards they'd pour melted wax into the locks and put a seal on the wax so he couldn't pick the locks even if he wanted to. When everyone else climbed out of the tank, a huge hose would start pouring in water."

"But he'd drown," said Bedloe.

"That's what everybody thought. It only took about ten minutes for the tank to fill to the top and over Zaretski's head. But when the water was up to his waist, a circular curtain would drop around the tank. There were people all around the curtain to see that nobody got inside to help Zaretski. A few minutes later the curtain would be lifted. The tank would be full of water, but there was Zaretski standing on the stage beside it, soaking wet, the chain lying at his feet. Then the chain would be inspected again. The handcuffs were still locked, the wax and seals still intact."

"And he always succeeded?" asked Bedloe.

"No. In Prague the curtain went up and Zaretski was still in the tank, chained to the bottom. He had drowned."

"But how did he escape the other times?"

"Nobody knows. Among magicians that trick is as famous as Houdini's disappearing elephant at the Hippodrome in New York. And after Zaretski was buried the chain somehow disappeared."

"And now I have the chain," said Grauscher. He rang the bell for the servant.

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"Bring in the chain, Philip," ordered Grauscher when the youth appeared. "I think Mr. Wrenn has decided to accept my challenge."

"You know that any magician worth his salt would sell his soul for a look at that chain, to say nothing of duplicating the escape," said Wrenn.

When Philip returned, Bedloe looked at the object in his hand as if it were some kind of poisonous snake. The chain was only three feet in length, its massive links resembling iron doughnuts strung together. At each end of the chain there was an iron handcuff. The keyholes in the cuffs had been picked free of wax, and the chain, short as it was, looked strong enough to hold back an elephant.

"And do you have the tank, too?" asked Wrenn, taking the chain from Philip and handling it almost with reverence.

"Good heavens, no. I'm not a murderer, man!" exclaimed Grauscher. "I just want to see if you can get yourself free. The price of failure is high enough already. I'm not asking for your death."

"What are you going to chain him to?" asked Bedloe.

"I think I have just the thing," replied Grauscher.

Taking a candlestick from the table he rose and marched toward the front door of the huge house, beckoning Bedloe and Wrenn to follow. As they went through the door, Grauscher flicked a switch which turned on floodlights, illuminating the spacious, well-kept grounds. The sound of waves hitting a beach was louder now, and a cement walk led to the top of a flight of wooden steps. At this point the ground dropped away abruptly, forming a sheer cliff fifty feet high. The area at the bottom of the cliff was lighted, and Bedloe could see a small private beach and a dock for boats.

The three men went down the steps with Grauscher holding the candlestick in one hand and the chain in the other. They reached the bottom, and with a flourish Grauscher indicated the flagpole in the center of the beach.

The flagpole, set in concrete, was a straight pine log thirty feet high and eighteen inches thick at the base. Since it was meant to resemble a ship's mast, there was a spar eight feet long and four inches thick which ran horizontally across the pole about two-thirds of the way up. The spar was attached to the pole by means of a single hand-forged bolt an inch in diameter. Although the pole and spar had recently been given a coat of white paint, the flag rope and other rigging had been removed. What was left was a huge cross.

Geoffrey slapped the base of the pole. There was a dull *thunk* of flesh hitting solid wood. "This ought to serve nicely," he said, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbing his hands vigorously. "The paint's of poor quality; it

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comes off on anything that touches the pole. But the wood's solid enough."

"Yeah, that ought to hold him," said Bedloe. "But how about letting me search him before we put the chain on him?"

"Unfair," said Wrenn softly. "I didn't know what Grauscher's challenge was to be until he told both of us just a few minutes ago, so I could hardly have made any prior preparations. I claim the right to make use of anything I have on my person."

"He has a point," said Grauscher. "I think I'll allow it."

"But how do we know he hasn't got a hacksaw in that trick suit of his?" asked Bedloe.

"We don't. But if he uses it, you'll know his method of escape, so you'll win. According to my conditions, he must remove the cuffs without damaging the chain in any way. Besides, it would take him several hours to saw through steel as hard as this chain."

"That reminds me," said Wrenn. "How much time are you going to give me?"

"Zaretski had about five minutes," said Grauscher. "On the other hand, he had plenty of practice. You may want to mull over your predicament for a while. Let's say an hour. Within one hour you must once again be seated at the table we just left, or Mr. Bedloe wins."

Wrenn nodded. Bedloe jerked the magician roughly to the flagpole and compelled him to surround the pole with his arms and wrists. Then Grauscher grasped each wrist and clamped a cuff of the Zaretski Chain around it. Bedloe checked both cuffs to be sure there was no possibility of either being loose enough for Wrenn to force his hand back through it.

"Just one final touch," said Grauscher. Taking each of Wrenn's wrists in turn, he tilted the candle he was holding so that melted wax flowed into the locks in the cuffs. Then, when the wax had hardened, he scratched a rough *G* on it with his thumbnail.

"Crude, but it'll do in place of a seal," said Grauscher. "I'll know if he tries to tamper with the locks. And now we'll leave you, Mr. Wrenn. You'll find us chatting in the dining room any time within the next hour. I'll turn off the outside lights, except for those on the beach here, so that you can work in complete privacy."

As he and Bedloe turned to climb the steps, his only answer was the clink of the chain against the flagpole.

In the dining room Bedloe stared at his watch. Fifteen minutes passed as if they were as many hours. Forty-five minutes more, and he'd have Wrenn "nailed."

"You're silent, Mr. Bedloe," said Grauscher with a chuckle. "I can't understand why. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain in this little game.

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"I'm afraid he'll do it, Grauscher," said Bedloe. "I'm afraid Wrenn will escape from that chain. It's impossible—but he'll do it. What's that? I heard footsteps!"

"It's only Philip. Perhaps I'd better invite him in here or you'll be jumping out of your skin every time you hear him move."

At the tinkle of the bell Philip entered the room and stood next to Grauscher's chair.

"Sit down, my boy," said Grauscher. "You're giving Mr. Bedloe the jitters."

Without a word Philip sat in Wrenn's chair, facing Bedloe. He stared unblinking at the detective. Finally Bedloe dropped his eyes to his watch again.

"Twenty minutes gone," said Bedloe. "Only twenty minutes. Maybe I should take a quick look."

"It wouldn't be playing the game," said Grauscher. "We guaranteed him privacy for an hour."

He rammed a fresh cigar into his mouth and immediately Philip took a wooden match from his pocket. Before he could strike it, the match dropped from his fingers onto the table. He produced another, flicked it with his thumbnail, and held it out to Grauscher who puffed deeply.

Another ten minutes went by.

Grauscher relaxed with his cigar while Bedloe watched Philip absently toying with the two wooden matches. The youth placed them on the table with the burned one over the other and at right angles to it, forming an X. Then he rotated the upper one until the matchsticks lay side by side, parallel with one another. After doing this several times, he removed a ring from his finger and slid it onto one arm of the X until it reached the other match. Finally he swiveled the matches until, in their parallel position, both could slide through the ring at the same time.

He's nervous, thought Bedloe. But what's he got to be nervous about? The most important thing in the world to him isn't whether or not a man can get out of a foolproof pair of handcuffs. Maybe he's not used to sitting down at the same table as Grauscher.

Just then Philip glanced up, saw the detective watching him, and with a quick motion stuffed the matches and ring into a pocket of his white jacket.

"Mr. Grauscher tells me you can handle yourself pretty well in a fight, Philip," said Bedloe, more to relieve the tension than anything else.

"Yes, sir," said Philip, smiling shyly. "If Mr. Grauscher says so."

"He's a regular engine of destruction," said Grauscher. "Too modest to tell you about it himself. Get that cutting board from the kitchen, Philip."

Without a word Philip left the room. He returned carrying a piece of birchwood about a foot square and three-quarters of an inch thick.

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The board was stained with the juice of vegetables that had been cut on it.

Grauscher stood and grasped the board solidly. "Break it, Philip!" he commanded.

Philip made a fist, then extended the knuckles of his index and middle fingers. There was a loud shout, and Bedloe saw the servant's hand rocket forward a scant six inches. The two knuckles smashed into the board and there was a sharp cracking sound. Triumphantly, Grauscher held up the two pieces into which the board had been split.

"May I go now, sir?" asked Philip, an embarrassed expression on his face. Grauscher nodded.

Half an hour to go.

Bedloe's watch ticked off another five minutes, and he could feel the sweat start on the palms of his hands. Only twenty-five minutes and I've got him, thought the detective. Please don't let anything happen. Please—

"Mr. Grauscher! We've been robbed!" Philip's voice echoed through the house, and the youth himself came bounding into the dining room. "It's the vault, sir. Somebody's broken in. The money —your coin collection, too. It's all gone!"

"He did it! Wrenn got away!" Bedloe shouted angrily.

"Blast it, I never thought he'd be able to steal from me," said Grauscher. "Now we'll see what kind of detective you really are, Mr. Bedloe. If you want Wrenn, you'll have to get back my belongings, too. You see, that film I told you about was also in the vault."

Bedloe bolted out of his chair and ran to the front door, dashing through it and out onto the lawn. Behind him Grauscher flicked on the outside lights. Bedloe looked down at the illuminated beach and gasped in surprise at what he saw there.

Lyle Wrenn was still firmly chained to the flagpole.

Within fifteen minutes Bedloe had examined the chain which held Wrenn, scouted the area for some place where the magician might have hidden the loot, threatened Wrenn, pleaded with him, and cursed himself for being seventeen kinds of a fool. He sat down on the sand and put his head in his hands just as Grauscher and Philip came down the stairs.

"The vault's cleaned out," said Grauscher. "Stripped bare. But how —"

"He got loose," said Bedloe. "Somehow Wrenn got loose and came back into the house without our hearing him. He must have broken into your vault while Philip was with us in the dining room."

"Dammit, Bedloe, he *couldn't* have got loose," Grauscher objected. "He's here, isn't he?"

"Of course he's here. After he robbed you he came back."

"Don't be an ass, man. Why would he do that?"

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Bedloe stared at Wrenn who was looking back at him with an amused expression on his face. "For an alibi," said the detective. "How can I make a charge of robbery against him when all he has to say is that he was chained to this flagpole at the exact time the robbery took place—with three witnesses to prove it!"

"Frankly, you'd have a hard time convincing me he was guilty, to say nothing of convincing a judge and jury," said Grauscher. "Unless, of course, you can give me some logical explanation of how he got those cuffs off and put them back on again without disturbing the locks or the wax."

Wrenn's done it again, thought Bedloe. He's going to get away with it, and there's not a thing I can do to prevent it. The detective looked at Philip who was toying again with the matches and the ring. At the same time the servant was looking upward at the spar which crossed the flagpole.

Bedloe saw Philip turn the matches between his fingers as if they were on a pivot. First in the shape of an X and then parallel. Involuntarily Bedloe's eyes went upward, following Philip's gaze to the point where the huge bolt fastened the spar.

That was it.

"I've got you, Wrenn," said the detective jubilantly. "I know how you got loose. And when they put you in prison I'm going to weld the cell door shut myself."

"Really, Bedloe, I'm innocent of any and all charges against me," said the magician coolly. "But if you know how I can get free I wish you'd tell me. I confess, the Zaretski Chain has defeated me. And these cuffs are beginning to hurt my wrists."

"By all means, tell us," said Grauscher.

"I'll do better than that," replied Bedloe. "If you'll lend me Philip's services, I'll let him demonstrate how it was done."

Grauscher nodded. After a short whispered conference with Philip, Bedloe walked to the boat dock, took a folding knife from his pocket, and cut a short piece of mooring line from a coil lying there. Then he brought the rope—a little longer than the Zaretski Chain—back to Grauscher.

Moving to the side of the flagpole opposite to Wrenn, Philip extended his arms and Bedloe tied one end of the rope to each of the youth's wrists, leaving about a three-foot length between them.

"This," said Bedloe, pointing to the rope, "represents the Zaretski Chain. Unless Philip unties the rope, he is as firmly attached to the pole as Wrenn."

"Yes, but how will this show us the way Wrenn removed the cuffs?" asked Grauscher.

"He never did remove them," replied Bedloe. "Watch."

He signaled to Philip, and the youth wrapped his arms and legs

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around the flagpole and began to climb.

"The rope and the chain both leave plenty of room for the hands and arms," said Bedloe. "See. The rope isn't slowing Philip down at all."

"No, but that crosspiece will stop him," said Grauscher, pointing to the spar. "He'll never get past that."

The spar did stop Philip, but only for a moment. Gripping the pole tightly with his arms, he swung one foot outward and hooked an ankle around the spar. Now unbalanced, the spar pivoted easily on the single bolt holding it. As it swung toward a vertical position, Philip slid back down the pole, drawing the spar closer and closer until at last it was alongside the pole itself. The boy slid to the base and rested, still fastened to the pole by the rope.

After a few moments Philip again climbed the pole, this time hitching himself over and past the spar which was now parallel with the pole. He reached the top, flicked the length of rope between his wrists over the top of the pole, then quickly slid to earth again. He was free of the pole although the rope was still fastened to his hands.

"Of course, Wrenn never did remove the chains from his wrists," said Bedloe. "He never had to. With three feet of chain between the cuffs he wasn't hindered much."

Grauscher applauded. "Bravo, Mr. Bedloe! You win the bet. Now let's retrieve my missing things. Own up, Wrenn. Where did you hide them?"

Bedloe wasn't listening. Ten years of pursuit were at an end. All he had to do now was find that reel of film and he'd have Wrenn nailed. It shouldn't be this easy, thought the detective. He'd always imagined capturing Wrenn only after a wild chase at the end of which he'd arrest the magician with his pockets full of stolen property. But instead, here was his quarry, chained and helpless. Somehow, Bedloe wasn't elated.

Wearily he watched Philip kneel at the water's edge to wash away the paint that had flaked off the pole onto his hands. The solution had been clever. It had been a fine bit of detective work. Bedloe swiveled his head to look at the immaculately dressed Wrenn, still chained to the flagpole.

Yes, the solution had been clever —and all wrong.

"Look at Philip," said Bedloe to Grauscher in a low voice. "Look at what he's doing."

"Just getting his hands clean," answered Grauscher. "That cheap paint comes away from the pole at the slightest touch."

"Yeah," drawled Bedloe. "Seems to me that if a man climbed the pole he'd be covered with it."

"Of course he would. But what has that got to do with—" Grauscher turned to look at Wrenn, and his eyes narrowed. "Odd," he continued. "Wrenn's clothing doesn't

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have a white mark on it. The paint would certainly show up against that black cloth. He must have stripped before beginning his climb."

Bedloe shook his head. "He could have got his pants off, but locked in that chain he couldn't possibly have removed his shirt and jacket."

"But how could he have climbed that pole without—"

"He didn't," said the detective. "He didn't escape from the pole, Mr. Grauscher."

"Then how could he have robbed me?"

"It wasn't Wrenn who robbed you, Mr. Grauscher. It was Philip."

"Impossible!"

"It had to be him," said Bedloe confidently. "He heard us plan this whole fantastic business. He's the only one who had access to your vault. The fact that you put the film there was just his good luck. He took that with the rest of the stuff just to throw suspicion on Wrenn.

"I wondered why he kept playing with those matches until I caught on that the spar would pivot. He thought of one way Wrenn might be able to escape and allowed me to 'discover' it, figuring Wrenn would be blamed for the robbery. And it would have worked if it hadn't been for the flaking of that white paint."

"Bedloe! Look out!" Wrenn's voice rang out across the beach. Instinctively the detective whirled. Unnoticed, Philip had come up behind them. The youth jabbed out once, striking Grauscher just below the point of the chin, and the old man fell to the ground. Bedloe took two quick steps backward, then turned to face his assailant.

"You're a better detective than I gave you credit for," said Philip in an emotionless voice. "I didn't think you'd notice the paint against this white uniform. It's a pity that with your natural antagonism to Mr. Wrenn you couldn't have overlooked it."

"I never arrested anybody on a bum rap, boy," said Bedloe. "Not even Wrenn."

"Too bad," said Philip. "I'm going to have to kill you, Mr. Bedloe. You saw what I did to that cutting board up at the house. Think what the same blow will do to flesh and bone—yours." Slowly he clenched his fist, then extended the two knuckles.

"Don't try to run," he said. "I'm faster, and it would just be more painful when I finally caught you."

Bedloe could feel the sweat running down his back. As Philip leaned nearer the flagpole, preparing for the final lunge, the detective instinctively threw up both arms in front of his face and waited with eyes closed for the killing stroke.

He heard a rattling of chain, followed by a gurgling sound. Quickly he opened his eyes. He saw Philip standing with his head pulled back against the pole. The youth was making horrible sounds in his throat and clawing desperately at

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something looped around his neck.

"I've got him!" Wrenn cried out, tightening the chain. "I threw the chain around his neck when he backed up against the pole."

Bedloe watched Philip's struggles grow weaker, and finally the youth slumped to the ground, unconscious.

A few minutes later Bedloe had ascertained that Grauscher was all right and would suffer nothing more serious than being unable to talk for a few days. Philip was securely tied with strips of his own clothing, and Wrenn, his manacles clanking, fished a cigarette from an inside jacket pocket.

"You hate my guts," he said to Bedloe, "but you wouldn't arrest me for a crime you knew I hadn't committed. It's hard to understand a man like you."

"He'd have killed me if it hadn't been for you," said the detective.

Wrenn merely nodded.

"I'm going up to the house to call the police," said Bedloe. "I'll be there for about ten minutes. Then I'll need another ten or fifteen minutes to find out where Philip stashed that stuff." He looked significantly at the chain which still held Wrenn, and then at the top of the pole. "That should give you time for—whatever you're going to do."

"What about that reel of film?" asked Wrenn.

"When I finally get you, I'll do it on my own," answered Bedloe. "Not with the help of somebody else's home movies." He turned and started up the steps to the house.

When he returned, Grauscher was sitting on the sand, shaking his head and looking at the struggling figure of the servant trying to break free of his bonds. Bedloe glanced at the flagpole and smiled. Lyle Wrenn and the Zaretski Chain were nowhere to be seen.

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A story of frightening suspense—frightening because it could so easily happen to you, to every one of us. "The thing is, if you have to die you might as well pick the way you want to go. Right?"

THE DEADLIER WEAPON

by LARRY NIVEN

HE WAS STANDING JUST OFF OVERland Drive, at the mouth of the On ramp to the Santa Monica Freeway, eastbound. He waited with an air of confidence, and his thumbsmanship seemed practiced. His placement was perfect—a few yards farther up the ramp and no car could have stopped for him without being hit by the car behind; a few yards closer and no driver would have known which route he wanted —the freeway or the street going past the ramp.

That was what caught my attention: his perfect positioning, not too far, not too near. A traveler, for sure. I dropped my arm out the window to signal, hit the brakes, and pulled up a few feet beyond him.

He was running before the car stopped. I pulled the lock knob and he threw the door open and was in, grinning, wasting no time. Good again: nobody waits for a lazy hitchhiker—you trot or you don't get a ride. As soon as he was in I swung between two cars and headed up the ramp, accelerating.

The traffic wasn't bad, not at three in the afternoon. Still, when you enter a freeway you concentrate on the traffic. Everything else gets ignored. I hardly knew what my passenger looked like; I'd seen only a poised silhouette with a thumb raised against the sky. But I gave him points again: he didn't speak until I was firmly settled in the middle-right lane and could afford to relax a little.

I don't pick up riders often. When I do, I follow the whim of the moment. The ones who look chatty when I want peace and quiet, and the ones who look glum or taciturn when I want conversation—these are left standing. I like the unusual ones, the ones who seem to have a kind of salesmanship.

Six months ago there'd been a college girl on Wilshire, carrying a bright red Christmas package almost as big as she was. She was homesick for Kansas. She'd told me what freezing rains are like, when water falls from the sky at night and freezes where it hits, so that in the morning all the trees and bushes are tinkling crystal, crackling in the wind. That would be some-

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thing to see. But I expect I never will.

Once there'd been a Negro on the freeway, carrying a gas can and smoking. As soon as he was in the car he'd tipped the ash off his cigarette into the gas can. "Okay," I'd said, to prove I was alert. "So you didn't run out of gas. Where you heading?"

"San Francisco," he'd told me. He'd started in Louisiana.

There was the guy who did run out of gas, stranded on the left of the freeway with his wife and four kids. "Oh, the kids are no trouble on a trip," he'd told me. "We know how to keep them interested. We play a game. The first kid to spot an Edsel gets a double ice-cream cone."

"Must make for frequent stops."

"How long since you last saw an Edsel?"

Right. I'd never seen two in the same day.

The hitchhiker said, "Thanks for the lift."

Traffic was fast and easy, the cars evenly spaced. I risked a look to the side.

He was young, somewhere in his mid-twenties. His nose was a touch too large and a touch too pointed, and his brown hair a touch too long. Gray plastic sunglasses, dark-blue windbreaker over a white shirt, serviceable gray slacks. Shoes which looked rugged enough but which were not hiking shoes. He'd shaved recently. Despite the long hair he looked too neat to have been on the road long. Perhaps he was just starting a trip.

"That's okay," I said. "You've used that thumb a lot, haven't you?"

"That's true." I heard a click then, but it didn't register until later. His voice was college-educated, with a little too much tenor.

"How far you going this time?"

"Just far enough."

An odd answer. I glanced over at him and found the point of a knife just touching my larynx. "Watch the road," he said.

I turned back, remembering the click. The knife was a switchblade with a six-inch blade, not very clean, but sharp, with the marks of a whetstone along the edge. I'd caught all that in one glance.

"Neither of us is going to get hurt," he said soothingly. He held the point at the side of my neck, just touching. "When you get the chance, you're going to pull over to the side, and I'm going to take your watch and the money in your wallet. Nothing else. I'll leave the wallet. I don't want your credit cards."

The lane to my left was clear. "Imagine how relieved I must be to hear it," I said, and eased over.

My passenger pushed gently with the knife point. "Wrong direction," he told me. "Go to the right."

I shifted into the far left lane, a little too fast. The knife point was an inch over my carotid artery. My hands wanted to scratch it, and I

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had to fight to keep them on the wheel. "You've done this before," I said, keeping my voice light.

"What makes you think so?"

"Your wording seems too practiced. On the one hand, the knife. On the other, you've told me just what you'll take, and you'll leave me the rest. The other cars will be going too fast to notice us, right?"

"That's right." He'd kept his voice soft and slow while making his pitch, but now an edge crept in. "This isn't rush hour. Even if someone notices something, he'll be a mile past us before he decides to stop and do something about it. Now—" He put on a bit more pressure, and the itch became a burn. "Move over."

"Don't do that," I said. At the increase in pressure I'd turned to look him full in the face. He set his jaw and held the stare, the knife still at my throat. Except for that, and one other thing, it would have been a comic scene: two grown men trying to outstare each other.

"Watch the road," he said, not soothingly. And then, "I said watch the road. Dammit, watch the road!"

Suddenly he turned and braced himself against the padded dashboard with both hands. I looked forward, hit the brake hard, and swerved. A navy-blue Riviera missed us by inches and dropped behind, weaving, the driver shouting soundlessly and leaning on his horn.

"Keep that knife out of my neck," I said. Some of the itch remained, and I reached up to scratch it. For my trouble I got a sharp stab of pain and a film of blood on my fingertips. "And you can tell me something else. How do I know you won't kill me before you take my wallet?"

"Cooperate and you won't get hurt."

"Why not?"

He lost patience. With a smooth, quick motion, too fast for me to grab at his arm even if I'd wanted to, he had the knife tip at my neck. "Now pull over. Yeee!" He jerked back as if he'd touched something red hot.

I'd been less quick, but I didn't have as far to move. At the touch of the knife I'd yanked the wheel sixty degrees left and instantly back again. I pulled the car out of the emergency lane at the left of the freeway, fighting the drag of the gravel.

"Don't do that," I told him.

"What's *with* you?"

"Just in a bad mood, I guess."

He was backed up against the right-front door, still holding the knife at ready, as if he were the defender and I the attacker. He licked his lips and asked, "Do you always drive this way when you're in a bad mood?"

"I've never been in this bad a mood before." I was trying to sound neither frightened nor belligerent. My smile must have looked peculiar, twisted, as if I'd put it on wrong.

"Look, all I want is your—"

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"Shut up."

"You can keep your watch."

"Imagine my gratitude. Now will you shut up? You've got nothing to do with this."

"I—" He couldn't speak; he was half strangling on his own indignation. Then I saw the overpass ahead, and I came alert.

I'd passed here before, ignoring the scenery. Now I peered forward to get details. Some major highway crossed the freeway here. The overpass rose gently up a landscaped slope, leaped across eight lanes of empty space, and dropped as gently back. Halfway across the gap, between the eastbound and westbound lanes, were massive concrete pillars. Ramps curved out to join freeway with highway, and there were green signs to tell me what turnoff this was.

"What's wrong?" my passenger said edgily, and I realized how rigidly I was sitting and how hard I was gripping the wheel. I didn't relax. "See that bridge?"

"Sure."

"Okay."

"What about it?"

"Nothing." I wasn't even trying to smile now.

"All I want is some cash," the hitchhiker explained patiently. "You pull over to the side and stop, and—"

"And you cut my throat and take the car too. The cops get nothing but a missing person report."

"No, no, no. All I want—"

"I don't care what you want."

"What do *you* want? Do you want to live?" Amazing, how his voice had lost that soothing quality.

I didn't answer. The overpass was closer.

The hitchhiker clamped his lips together, nerving himself to something. Suddenly, snakelike, he reached with the knife. I jerked the wheel, and he pulled back against the door. The wheel damn near jerked out of my hands as we hit the gravel. To make it worse, the freeway was curving right. I brought the car around, and the bridge was almost on us.

There were no cars near me. Maybe they didn't like the way I drove.

Still the freeway curved right, gently as always. I didn't curve with it. I had the accelerator on the floor, and we went faster and faster, the hitchhiker and the car and me, edging over onto the gravel. Up ahead, the gravel safety lane ended and there was the concrete supporting pillar of the bridge, with two big red-faceted reflectors shining in the mid-afternoon sunlight.

I aimed the car right at the reflectors.

My passenger seemed frozen. Only his head moved, swiveling to look at the supporting pillar, then back to my face, then to the pillar, then back to me. The pillar was coming up like a cream-colored wall. I was terrified. I made no attempt to hide it. Considering the

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way the wheel was jumping, trying to pull across the gravel and into the divider fence before we could reach the bridge support, I must have looked like a man wrestling with an alligator. There was sweat in my eyes, and at the last moment I whipped the edge of my right hand across my forehead and back to the wheel. Now my hand was dripping wet.

The concrete came at me.

I whipped the wheel hard over, putting my whole body into it. The car slewed, tried to move sideways, tried to roll over. We were going to hit sideways, through the fragile guard rail and into the supporting pillar. Then, with utmost reluctance, the car moved skidding to the right.

Suddenly the concrete was behind us and I heard my passenger make a high whimpering sound.

"Hesitation marks," I gasped. I couldn't get enough air. Reality was a blur. Was I about to faint? I certainly didn't want to pass out.

"You're crazy—crazy!"

I fumbled for a cigarette and managed to get it to my mouth. "There's always hesitation marks. A man shoots himself in the head, you find holes in the wall where he jerked the gun away the first four times. He cuts his throat, you find three or four slashes where he didn't cut deep enough." I was gasping out the words, fighting for air. I had to have air.

"You're out of your mind!"

"The thing is, if you have to die you might as well pick the way you want to go. Right?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I was going to marry a girl."

"Congratulations." If my passenger was trying for sarcasm it didn't come through. He only sounded scared. He sat facing straight toward me, with one leg on the seat and his back hard up against the door.

"Thanks. Thanks a lot. Only she decided I wasn't her type. She—she tried to tell me we'd both known it all along. We'd just been fooling ourselves, she said. Liar."

"They do that," said my passenger shakily.

"Everybody does that. You know how my dad told me he and Mom were getting divorced?" My cigarette was still in my mouth, unlit. I reached and stabbed at the car lighter. "I was fifteen. They called me into the living room and—"

"I don't *care* what your father told you when you were fifteen!"

"I do. My dad walked a few times around the room and then finally he said, 'I suppose you know your mother and I are separated.' Liar. They'd kept it from me because they thought it might interfere with my finals at school."

All I saw of him was with the corner of my eye. But I saw him start to say something, stop, close his eyes tight to think.

The lighter popped out.

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He blurted, "You're *crazy!* You can't *kill* yourself just because some broad gives you the shaft!"

I pulled the lighter out and reached across the seat to touch it to the tip of his nose. He never moved to stop me. He couldn't believe what I was doing, not until he actually felt the heat. Then he screamed and threw his arms over his face. He missed grabbing my arm because I'd already pulled it back and was lighting my cigarette.

"She's not a broad," I told him. "And if she was, you wouldn't be the one to say it. Keep your dirty mouth shut."

"Let me off," said the hitchhiker. He'd forgotten he had the knife.

"Why should I?"

"I never tried to kill you. It's not fair."

"Who said anything about fair?" My grin felt natural now. After all, we were even. The blood on my neck and the burn on his nose.

"Look, you don't want to kill yourself. You don't want to die. You're just kidding yourself. Just wait. Just wait until tomorrow. You'll feel different, really you will. I've felt like that myself, but it always went away. Sometimes it lasted for days but it always—"

"It's too late."

"It's not too late! You're still alive!"

"This isn't my car."

"What?"

"Do I look like the owner of a brand-new expensive car?"

Eyes see what they're trained to see, what they expect to see. A polo shirt is just a T-shirt with a collar, except for the material. Pants are pants, except to the guy who wears them. He knows if they bind, or if they're too loose, or if they're tailored to fit just right. If the seat looks shiny, then they're too old, but how can you tell when he's sitting down?

"You mean you stole it?" he said.

I bobbed my head a couple of times, jerkily.

"Let me out of here!"

"I don't want to get knifed."

"Please!"

"Fasten your seat belt."

"Why?" But he knew. He knew.

"We're going to have an accident."

"Let me out first. Look, I—will you please look?"

I found I was strangling the wheel again, because up ahead the freeway became a bowl of concrete noodles. I'd driven this route before. Here in downtown Los Angeles was where the Santa Monica Freeway headed into the Harbor, Santa Ana, and San Bernardino Freeways. The ramps led up and over and around and under each other, and most of the time there was nothing but empty space to left and right. Speeding cars and empty space, separated by fragile metal rails and common sense.

My passenger knew it too. He was swiveling his head, toward the road, toward me, toward the road,

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toward me. Then he snapped out of it. He yelled, "Will you *look at me?*"

I looked, and he twitched, because now I wasn't watching the road. He was holding the knife out the window, holding it with two fingers around the tip of the handle. He let it drop, ostentatiously, and I saw it bounce once in the mirror. "I dropped the knife," he said. "You saw it. Now let me out."

I nodded. I braked and swung to the left. The car lurched and tried to pull free and slowed and stopped, not too far from where there wouldn't have been any gravel to stop on. Cars whizzed past, and the wind of their passing sounded like blows.

"Out," I said.

"Not here! I'll be killed!"

I touched the accelerator and the car jumped forward. He was out and around the side and behind the trunk in one smooth, lithe motion, and if there'd been a car coming it would have hit him. I touched the accelerator again to get beyond him, then reached across to slam the door he'd left open.

At the next gap in the traffic I was off, accelerating hard to keep from being hit from behind. The last I saw of the hitchhiker, he was hunched over the guard rail, actually using it for support, not looking at the four lanes of traffic he'd have to pass to stay alive . . .

I edged to the right across four lanes of hurtling cars, being careful. I saw no point in getting killed now. I took the next turnoff, slowing, feeling my hands begin to shake. My cigarette was still going, and I dragged on it, practically breathing through it. Amazingly, it was mostly unburned.

I turned in at the first gas station, stopped alongside the pumps, and rested my head on the wheel. I rubbed my forehead against the smooth surface, harder and harder, because the sensation told me I was still alive.

"What can we do for you? I said —Hey, mister, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Where's a telephone?"

"Over there." The booth was in plain sight. I couldn't have missed it if I'd bothered to look first.

"Good. Fill it up. I've got to call the police."

I had trouble getting the coin in the slot.

"About my height," I told the desk sergeant. "Five eleven, say. You wouldn't call him skinny, but he's not fat. Brown hair, a little too long, parted on the left. Long thin face. By the time you get to him he should have a great big blister on the end of his nose."

"Why?"

"At one point I touched him with a lit cigarette lighter."

"You did!" Hah! I'd surprised him. At first he'd sounded like someone who could never be surprised by anything. "Go on, Mr. Jennison."

"He's wearing sunglasses, a dark-blue windbreaker, gray slacks. I left

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him stranded on the wrong side of the eastbound lane, just west of the Olympic turnoff."

"We'll find him, Mr. Jennison. Can you come down to the station and give us a signed statement?" He told me how to get there.

"Okay, fine, but will you give me an hour? I need a drink."

"I can believe that. No hurry, Mr. Jennison. But we do need your statement."

One fast drink stopped my shakes, at least on the outside. I thought I could trust my voice now, so I called Carla in Garden Grove. "I've had some car trouble, honey. Nothing expensive, but I won't be home for dinner. Tell Stan and Eva I'm sorry, and I'll be in around eight."

"Oh, that's a shame. What kind of trouble?"

"Tell you later."

By the time I got home I'd know how to tell Carla the truth in a way that wouldn't scare the pants off her.

Two drinks and I began to giggle, thinking about the blister on the end of the hitchhiker's nose, thinking about the hopeful look on his face when he dropped the knife out the window, how he had to make so *damn* sure I was watching him. Giggles were too much of a good thing, so I had a sandwich and a glass of milk to drown the second drink.

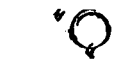
I could legitimately tell Carla that the hitchhiker had never had a chance. It would reassure her, and it was true. I'd been better armed from the beginning. He'd had nothing but a knife. I'd had a car. Much the deadlier weapon.

I reached the station half an hour late. They'd changed desk men. I was explaining why I was there when they brought in the hitchhiker.

He wasn't struggling. He seemed completely exhausted. He actually had trouble walking. But his head came up when he saw me. The tip of his nose was a small white bubble surrounded by angry red flesh.

"So you didn't have the guts!" he snarled. "You chickened out! You yellow-bellied—" He paused to think up an adequately insulting noun, ignoring the police officer who jerked warningly at his arm.

"I couldn't go through with it," I admitted, and looked sheepishly down at the toes of my shoes. Why tell him? He had enough troubles.



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Remember Steven Peters' first and second stories—"George Washington, Detective" (historical detection) and "The Backyard Dig" (archeological detection)—both published in the August 1967 issue of EQMM. Remember how different they were from each other—that was the main reason we printed the two stories back to back. Now, here is Mr. Peters' third story—and how different it is from his first two!

Meet a new (or if not new, surely an unhackneyed) type of detective—the psychologist of a State Prison . . .

ON DEATH ROW

by STEVEN PETERS

RAZA VALKUNIN WILL DIE AT PRECISELY 12:30 A.M. tomorrow. I am able to specify the exact time because the State will electrocute him then and promptness is characteristic of the State when executing convicted murderers. In other matters, such as paying its employees, the State frequently procrastinates. I know because I am employed by the State Prison as a psychologist.

My primary responsibility is prisoner rehabilitation but the State recognizes the impossibility of rehabilitating a corpse and so does not require me to have contact with murderers. However, I am interested in investigating the psychological factors which drive men to murder, and for some time now I have conducted a research project of my own along these lines, which is how I met Raza Valkunin.

Since the day Raza was condemned to die, he has not been permitted to leave his cell on Death Row. Instead of the usual comfortable consultation in my office with the patient delivered to me, I had trudged down endless corridors to Raza's cell. Out of sheer deprivation of human contact—only the warden and the chaplain were allowed to visit him—he had agreed to talk to me.

"Did you know, Doc," he said to me during our first session, "I always wanted to be a cop? I even took the exams to get on the force."

No murderer had ever told me that before and it heightened my interest in Raza. While he spoke, I studied him carefully. He was twenty-eight years old, about five feet ten inches tall, and in excellent physical condition. He wore prison garb—a blue denim shirt, open at the throat, and formless pants without cuffs. The only departures from standard issue were the paper san-

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dals on his feet and the absence of a belt. His hair was already cut quite short, as if in anticipation of his impending execution.

"Yeah," Raza went on, "I crammed hard for three months for those exams to get in. I was ready to drop by the time they rolled around. I couldn't sleep at night or nothing. Boy, was I jittery—all that coffee I drank to stay awake and study."

"You really pushed yourself," I commented, encouraging him to continue.

"You know it, Doc," he replied. "I kept telling myself I hadn't studied near hard enough. You jerk, I kept saying, you want to flunk that exam? You want to be a cop, don't you? Then get going on those books. At the end of three months I knew that stuff cold, but I was still jumpy about the exam."

"What happened when you took it?" I asked.

"Just what I was afraid of, Doc. I goofed. Hell, I knew the stuff, but my mind went blank on the exam. I like, froze up, you know what I mean?"

"I know," I replied.

"Now why the hell would I tighten up like that?" Raza asked.

"A lot of people panic when they are tested on what they know. Not many of us like to be put on the spot," I explained.

"The exam was nothing like the way I tightened up on the range that afternoon," Raza replied. "I picked up the gun and it felt so heavy I had to use my other hand to hold my wrist up. I aimed at the dummy and got the shakes so bad my teeth damn near jumped out of my head. I felt cold and sick, like I was going to lose my lunch right there in front of all those guys. All I wanted was to get the hell out of there. I dropped the gun and ran and I never went back."

"You were really upset," I said, "so much so that I am curious as to why you wanted to become a policeman in the first place?"

"I don't know," Raza replied. "Ever since I was a kid I wanted to be a cop." He paused a moment and stared at the naked bulb suspended out of reach from the ceiling of his cell. "Funny, I've always felt like I wanted to be sure I was on the right side of the law, you know what I mean?"

"Yes," I said, "as a policeman you felt people would identify you with law and order."

"Yeah," Raza agreed, "I wanted people to—I don't know how to put it—I always felt like people would look at me and—well, like think I was the kind of guy that—uh, you know, would do violent things."

It was difficult for him to express this thought. He appeared embarrassed by this insight into himself. His comment, however, provided me with an opening to probe about the murder, and I forged ahead.

"You mean people expected that you might kill?" I asked. I noticed

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that a small muscle on the side of his jaw convulsed as I asked the question. Other than that he betrayed no sign that the question disturbed him.

"You think they were right, don't you?" he asked quietly. Then with more concern for my feelings than I had evidenced for his, he continued without awaiting my answer. "I felt lousy after I flunked the exam. For a couple of weeks I didn't do anything or go any place, just sat in my room. I didn't want to eat or sleep. Then one day I got this idea that I wasn't good enough to be a cop."

"What made you feel you did not deserve to be a policeman?" I asked.

"I don't know. Like I said, I wasn't good enough. It just made sense to me. It was right and I felt better, kind of excited, like now I knew something I should've known all along." He stopped and chuckled. "Sounds backwards, doesn't it, Doc? I mean thinking bad about myself like that made me feel good inside."

"It does seem strange," I said.

"Anyway, after that, I started going out, doing things, you know. That's when I met her, my girl friend. I loved her, Doc, more than anything, even after I found out she was two-timing me."

"Are you saying that you didn't kill her?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "I'm not saying that. I oughta die."

Raza then proceeded to tell me about the girl, with all the standard clichés of a man in love. Since we had already been talking for well over an hour and a half, I decided to terminate the session on this positive note.

"Come back and see me when you can, Doc," Raza said as I left. "I'll still be here for a while yet."

It was three days before my work eased enough to allow me to schedule another talk with Raza. I found him in good spirits even though the date of his execution was less than a week away.

"What do you want to know about me today, Doc?" he asked.

"I thought you might tell me something about your childhood," I said.

"Sure," he agreed, and for the next hour, starting with the present, he worked back through his life. Shortly before our time was up I remarked, "You haven't told me anything about your parents."

There was a pause and then he said, "There's not much to tell. My old lady died about eight years ago, from a stroke. I hurt her enough. I'm glad she didn't live to know about—about this."

"How did you hurt her?" I asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, becoming agitated.

"Perhaps you can tell me about your father," I suggested.

Raza suddenly stood up and strode to the door of his cell. He grabbed the bars and stood with his back to me.

"I never knew him too well," he

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said slowly. "He died when I was six." He turned to face me and I saw tears streaming down his face. He took a menacing step toward me. "I don't want to talk about him."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I asked you to remember some things that were not very pleasant. Maybe you'll feel more like talking about it another day."

"Maybe, Doc, maybe. There isn't much time left, you know."

"I know," I said, and called for the guard to let me out.

I was perplexed about Raza. He was different from other murderers I had known. Most of them—except for the professional killer—saw themselves as temperate people, until that moment when their one violent act shattered forever their self-delusion. But Raza thought of himself as a man capable of doing violent things.

He had even attempted to discipline that violent side of himself by becoming a police officer, but it refused to be constrained. It had paralyzed his mind on the examination and his failure had thrown him into a depression. Raza also impressed me as a man driven by guilt—not guilt over his crime as many murderers feel, but guilt over some violence in his past. My curiosity about Raza prompted me to review more thoroughly the account of his crime and trial in his prison record.

Raza's girl friend had been found shot to death in her apartment. Her relationship with Raza was common knowledge among the tenants of the building. The police readily obtained this information and routinely brought Raza in for questioning. He appeared stunned when informed of her death, but then collapsed and admitted his guilt. He steadfastly refused to discuss the details of the murder, but the police easily established motive and opportunity. There was no direct physical evidence, since the murder gun was never found.

The actual trial was quite short. The State relied on the usual motive in such cases, jealousy. The girl had been seeing another man behind Raza's back, and he was duly produced as a star witness. He supported the prosecution's case for first-degree murder. The defense argued it was a crime of passion, unpremeditated, and hence, second-degree murder. Raza's counsel complained of his client's failure to cooperate fully in assisting him to prepare a defense, a complaint given credence by Raza's indifferent attitude toward the entire proceedings.

The jury returned a verdict of guilty in the first degree after a scant thirty minutes of deliberation. They did not recommend mercy. The judge, as required by law, pronounced the death sentence by electrocution. Justice had been done and only vengeance remained to be satisfied.

In the remaining few days before the execution I made repeated re-

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quests to see Raza, but he refused them all. Then, unexpectedly, the day before he was to die, he asked to see me. Seated opposite him on a bench in his cell, I was impressed by his calmness, as if he were finally at peace with himself. I would not have been so calm if I knew I was going to die the next day.

"Hello, Doc," he said. "Thanks for coming. I've been hashing stuff over a lot since your last visit. I don't have much to do besides talk to myself, you know?" He paused as if gathering energy for what was to come. "You're like him, Doc, so I want to tell you something."

"About your father?" I asked.

"How'd you know?" Raza replied. "Yeah, it's about my old man. I told you he died when I was just a kid and I didn't know him well, but that's not true. I really loved the guy. He was good to me—hard, you know, but soft in his own way." Then he said in a voice so low I could barely hear him. "I'm sorry I killed him."

I straightened up in surprise. "You killed him?" I said. Raza nodded. "Tell me what happened," I urged.

"My father was a nut about hunting. He loved guns and wanted me to love them too. One day, when I was six, he was getting ready to go deer hunting. He took me into the kitchen and put his rifle in my hands. He got down beside me on one knee and showed me how to sight it and how to pull the trigger."

He paused and stared at the corner of his cell, recapturing that day from a distant childhood. I was silent, and in a moment he resumed speaking.

"It was great, him doing that like I was grown up. The more I think about it, it's just like yesterday. I wanted to go with him so bad, and I told him so, too. He got a kick out of it, messed up my hair, and said I was still a kid and had to stay home with the old lady. Then he left me with the rifle and went to get the rest of his hunting junk.

"I was mad about not going. I wanted to show him I was a man. I saw the box of shells on the table and shoved one in the gun, like he showed me. When he came back into the room, I poked the gun at him, jerked the trigger, and yelled Boom!

"The bullet hit him in the heart; he died right there. The noise shook the hell outa me. I let go of that gun like it was red-hot. I called to him but he wouldn't answer me. I was still yelling my guts out when the old lady ran into the room."

Raza told me all this in a flat tone of voice, scarcely changing his inflection. When he finished he said simply, "All my life I've been bugged by that. Any guy that killed his old man shouldn't oughta live, right, Doc? I'm sorry I did it. I'm sorry." He dropped his head into his hands to hide his tears.

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When I tried to console him he refused to respond. He displayed no further interest in what he had revealed, or in me. He would only say, in a monotone, "That's it. I don't want to talk no more. Now that I told you, get out."

Finally I gave up and left. I returned to my office, cancelled my patients for the rest of the day, and went home. Raza's story had depressed me. At supper I pushed away my meal, half eaten. I started reading a novel and then flung it aside after ten minutes.

Finally I grabbed my coat and left my dismal apartment for the neighborhood theater. I slouched in my seat through most of a miserable double feature, but all I saw on the screen was a little boy with a rifle standing over the dead body of his father. I left and shuffled home again. All evening some repressed thought had been gnawing at a corner of my mind, trying to eat its way into consciousness. I felt uneasy, on edge, as if there were something I should know but didn't.

I went into my den, closed the door, and slumped into an armchair. I stared at the abstract painting on the opposite wall until I thought my eyes would drown in the colors. Suddenly it was no longer an abstraction, but a concrete image of a gun, a child, and a murdered father frozen in time immediately after the shooting. Then the figure of the child startled into movement, dropped the gun as if it were hot and—and—and threw up on the corpse of his father.

My feet crashed to the floor as I leaped from my chair. Now what had led to a ridiculous association like that? Or was it ridiculous? There was something Raza had said—let's see—wait—yes, "I felt cold and sick, like I was going to lose my lunch right there in front of all those guys."

He was on the shooting range—the gun was heavy, leaden—he had to support his gun arm—cold—body shaking—teeth chattering—and he felt nauseated—panic—he dropped the gun and ran!

He had been describing an acute anxiety attack, of course. Suddenly I realized why. He had been afraid to fire the gun at that dummy target of a man. He was morbidly afraid of guns and *could not fire one!*

The full impact of this knowledge staggered me. Raza was innocent! He might have stabbed, beaten, or strangled his girl friend to death, but he was psychologically incapable of shooting her. Raza wanted to die in atonement for killing his father.

Raza Valkunin was to die at 12:30 this morning. I lunged for the phone on my desk and in my haste knocked over the clock beside it. The upturned dial read: 12:35.

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Cole Mason had the town in his pocket, and he was robbing the taxpayers blind. Only one man could stop him—Rossiter, the Governor's Special Investigator. And Rossiter was an honest man . . .

THE LAST WORD

by JAMES KNOX

THE SNIPER CROUCHED NEAR THE window of the empty third-floor apartment and fondled the weapon in his gloved hands. The rifle, a target model with an extra-heavy barrel and stock to minimize recoil, used a .30 caliber cartridge with a 110 grain bullet; it had an extremely flat trajectory, and the 12-power telescopic sight was designed to provide pinpoint accuracy.

There was no furniture in the apartment except a ponderous oak table with a machinist's vise bolted solidly on one edge. The sniper pushed the table across the floor to a position in line with the window. The casters on the table legs marked the bare wood floor, but he didn't care. After today he wouldn't be coming back to the apartment.

He loosened the swivel attachment on the vise and placed the rifle between its jaws so that it was pointing toward the window and slightly downward. Then he returned to the window and lifted the bottom of the drawn shade to locate his target . . .

Sitting on the bench in the small park, Edward Rossiter stretched out his legs until the heels of his shoes rested on the sidewalk. Aimlessly he surveyed the red-brick apartment building on the opposite side of the park. Some of the windows were broken, and spidery cracks were beginning to vein the masonry. The only signs of occupancy were several flower pots set out on a few window ledges. The blind in a third-floor window trembled slightly but it did not attract Rossiter's attention.

"Hello, Eddie. You wanted to see me?" Rossiter turned quickly to face the speaker, a heavy-set man who had come up behind the bench. "What's the matter, Eddie? You look a little pale. Don't tell me I scared the big man from the Governor's office."

"You scared me, Mason," replied Rossiter. "Now sit down and let me return the favor."

Cole Mason gave a humorless laugh. "No, thanks," he said. "I don't want anybody in town to see me sitting on the same bench with you."

Next to the bench, a little to the

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left, was a statue of Patrick Henry, for whom the park was named; the statue stood on a high marble base. Mason leaned on the base, his back against some of the raised letters of the statue's bronze plaque.

"Why did we have to meet here?" asked Rossiter. "I think your private office would be better for what I have to say."

"Listen, Mister Wise-Guy Special Investigator, this is still my town, see? Every day, right about this time, I take a walk in this park. People know you're in town to try and get something on me. If they don't see me taking my daily exercise, they might start thinking you've got me worried. Besides," Mason added, "it'll be a lot harder for anybody to listen in on what we're saying here in the park."

"Well, Cole, we've got something on you. And I wanted you to be the first to know."

"Big deal. What did you find out? That I filled my pen with taxpayers' ink down at City Hall?"

"Kickbacks on city contracts. The Police Department in your hip pocket. Second-rate materials used in city construction. Is that enough, Cole?"

"No. The Governor would never touch a case like that. He knows he could never trace anything to me."

"Half a million dollars in municipal funds missing—funds you were responsible for. Do you think the Governor would like to hear about that?"

Mason's grin wasn't quite so broad now. "Maybe," he shrugged, "but by the time you get your case ready to present, that money will be back in the city treasury."

"Come off it, Mason!" said Rossiter. "You're robbing the taxpayers of this town blind, your hoods are beating up citizens just for kicks or because they want to look at certain papers in the city records, and you've given this town the highest crime rate in the state. I'm surprised the people have let you get away with it this long."

"They've got to prove something first," smiled Mason.

"I'll prove something, Cole. I'll prove murder. Try talking your way out of that one with the Governor."

"Murder? Who?"

"Hal Weems. Your Assistant City Treasurer."

"You'll never lay that one at my doorstep, Rossiter."

"We found Bellman, Cole—in Detroit. I offered him immunity from prosecution. He talked."

Mason banged his fist against the base of the statue. Bellman. He should have got rid of Bellman permanently, not just sent him out of the state. If Bellman had talked, who knew how much he told the Governor's investigators?

"Who knows about this, Ed?" Mason asked in a low voice.

"I gave a copy of Bellman's statement to my assistant, Roy Quigley. But I imagine you and I are the

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only ones who know how damaging that statement really is. Right, Cole?"

"Can we make a deal?" Even as Mason said it, he knew what the answer would be. Edward Rossiter was that *rara avis* in politics, a completely honest and sincere man.

"No deal, Cole. And I've got to leave. Quigley is parked across the street, waiting for me." Rossiter got up from his bench.

The sweat was pouring from Mason's face. He leaned hard against the right end of the bronze plaque, took a white handkerchief from his pocket, and nervously mopped his brow.

In the third-floor apartment the window shade was now half raised. The sniper loosened the jaws and the swivel of the vise, squinted through the sight, turned the rifle to the position he wanted, and tightened the vise again.

Then he pulled the trigger.

The shot boomed in the small room, making the man flinch. The heavy gun in the vise, however, didn't move the slightest fraction of an inch . . .

Edward Rossiter never heard the shot that killed him. The soft-nosed bullet tore through his breastbone and mushroomed, slamming him back against the bench, which tipped over, carrying Rossiter's body to the ground.

In the time it took Roy Quigley to get out of his car and run across the street, a group of people appeared as if by magic and crowded around Rossiter's body. With one sweep of his arm Quigley brushed two of them out of his path and stared down at the body of his chief. He didn't need a doctor to tell him that Rossiter was dead; he'd seen too many bodies with that same ragdoll limpness while he was serving in Korea.

He spun around to face Mason, who was still standing in front of the base of the statue, his white handkerchief fluttering in his hand.

Quigley seized a lapel of Mason's coat in each fist and yanked him up on tiptoe. "You stinking scum!" shouted Quigley. "You stay right here until I get around to talking to you."

Then he turned and shouted to the small group of people, "Move away from the body. I don't want anybody touching it. And one of you call the police. Tell them to find out which apartment that shot came from."

He again turned to the pasty face of Cole Mason. "I want to see how you explain this, Mason!" Then Quigley turned on his heel and strode across the street.

In the now-empty apartment it didn't take Quigley long to find out that the police were going to have very little to work with. The rifle was expensive, but there was seemingly nothing about it that could be traced. It could have been bought

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at numerous sporting goods stores throughout the state and country without the owner having to present a license, or even identification. And there were no fingerprints on the weapon, the table, or the vise.

The owner of the building stated that, according to his records, the apartment had been vacant for several months. The table, so far as he knew, had been left by the previous occupant.

A check of the building's tenants revealed nothing. If they did have information, the knowledge that Cole Mason was involved effectively closed their mouths.

Finally the police left. Roy Quigley stood alone in the apartment and stared at the gun, still clamped in the vise. He heard a knock at the door and opened it. Cole Mason stood in the doorway, his hat in his hand.

Mason's face was a sickly gray, and his hands were shaking. "Quigley," he said, his voice a harsh whisper, "Ed—Mr. Rossiter. Is he—I mean—"

"He's dead, Mason. Does that make you happy?"

It took Mason several seconds to realize the implications of Quigley's last remark. Then his eyes widened, and his cigar dropped from his shaking fingers.

"You don't think that I planned—look, Ed Rossiter has been a pain in the neck ever since he came to this town. But I wouldn't pull something like that."

"No, Mason, you wouldn't pull anything like that. Just the way you wouldn't arrange the disappearance of that treasurer just because he found a few 'honest errors' in your books. Or the way you wouldn't have decent citizens beaten up because they had the nerve to hold meetings to protest the graft and corruption you've brought to this town. Nobody can prove this, so you didn't do it—is that the way you figure it? You and I both know that Ed Rossiter had something on you—something big. But we also know that without Rossiter I can't prove it. Even Bellman won't help. Rossiter was the only one who knew how important his evidence was."

"Quigley, I swear—"

Go ahead and swear, thought Quigley. Swear and sweat. Because law or no law, I'll nail you, Mason. You're going to pay.

"I'm going to pay," said Mason.

"What?" asked Quigley, wondering if Mason could have read his mind.

"Rossiter must have a family. They'll need help—money—now that he's gone. I'm going to pay. Anything they need they'll get, for as long as they live. That ought to prove I had nothing to do with this."

"Forget it," snapped Quigley. "I don't want the Rossiters to be in your debt when I close the cell door on you and throw away the key."

In spite of the threats, talking with Quigley seemed to bring back some of Mason's self-confidence.

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"Be reasonable, Quigley," he said. "Would I have Rossiter shot like that, right out in public? Look, if I had wanted to get him—which I didn't—I could have had it done in his hotel room or the train station. There are guys I could contact. This is my town, remember? I keep tabs on everyone in it."

"Come off it, Mason. I was sitting in my car right across the street from you and Mr. Rossiter. He thought you might try something. You took out your handkerchief, and immediately the shot was fired. It was a signal. That's the way I saw it, and that's the way I'll report it to my office."

"You haven't got a chance of making that stick. I know I'm not responsible for the shooting, and there isn't a person in this town who could set it up without my hearing about it. You haven't got a case here, and you know it. It was an outside job—somebody sent in to make me look bad."

"Too bad the sniper got away. I'll love to see the look on your face when he turns out to be one of your best friends."

"It's a frame," growled Mason, "but it won't work. I've lived in this town all my life. The town is my life. I run it my way, and no punk is going to change things just because he thinks politics ought to be run like a Ladies' Auxiliary tea. In this town I'm a big man. Anywhere else I'm nothing. I couldn't stand being nothing, Quigley."

Quigley walked over to the gun, still clamped tightly in the vise. The Chief of Police had given orders that nobody was to touch it or the table or the vise, and except for a light dusting of fingerprint powder those orders had been obeyed.

Putting his face down next to the gun, Quigley looked through the telescopic sight. He remained there for several minutes. Finally he straightened, and Mason noted what seemed to be a grim smile.

"Mason," said Quigley, "I've got to make a phone call. I want you to wait right here until I get back." He left the apartment, closing the door behind him.

Five minutes later he returned. "Mighty cooperative Police Department you've got in this town," he said. "All I had to do was mention your name, and they fell all over themselves to help me."

"Help you? How?"

"Mason, you said a few minutes ago that you were a big man in this town, and away from it you would be nothing. Well, if my little experiment comes off, I'm going to leave your town to you just as fast as I can get out of here. One thing, though, Mason. You said you kept tabs on everybody in town. I suggest you find the person who fired this gun—and soon. Round up him and all his friends and put 'em all in jail. Better plan on quite a big crowd. I've got a feeling this guy has a lot of friends."

"What are you talking about?"

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asked Mason. "I told you I don't know anything about whoever fired that gun."

"It's funny," smiled Quigley, "but I believe you, Mason. I really do."

"Then what—"

Quigley pointed through the open window, and Mason saw a police car pull up near the bench in front of which Rossiter had been shot. Two uniformed men got out and unloaded a thick, rectangular steel plate which they propped up before the bench. They returned to the car and from the trunk compartment brought out sandbags which they piled in front of the plate. The pile of sandbags reached a height of almost six feet.

"You know, Mason," said Quigley, "in the army we learned some funny things about telescopic sights. They seem to bring things right up close so you can't miss. But if a 'scope isn't adjusted exactly right, the shot can miss, sometimes by several feet. You see, the 'scope and the rifle don't always point in exactly the same direction."

There was a pounding on the stairs, and then one of the policemen entered the apartment. He silently handed a bullet to Quigley and left the room.

"Watch," said Quigley as he slipped the bullet into the chamber of the rifle. Taking a pencil from his pocket, he nudged the hair trigger. The report boomed inside the room, and Quigley motioned Mason to the window.

In front of the bench across the street one of the policemen had just placed his handkerchief over a hole in a sandbag where the slug had entered.

"Those sandbags are in the precise spot where Rossiter was standing, Mason," said Quigley. "You were a little off to the left there, if you'll remember, leaning against that bronze plaque on the statue of Patrick Henry. Do you happen to know what it says on that plaque, Mason?"

"It's something from a speech he once made in Virginia," said Mason. "What's that got to do with me?"

"Now, Mason, I want you to see what our unknown marksman was really aiming at. I want you to remember exactly where *you* were standing when the shot was fired. And I want you to think about it every time you walk down the public streets of *your* town. Because I've got a feeling the next time that sniper gets his hands on a rifle, he'll make sure his sights are properly adjusted. Go on, big man, look!"

Mason closed one eye and peered into the black tube. And then he realized exactly where the shot that killed Rossiter was meant to hit—the extreme right end of the plaque. Letters sculptured in bronze and magnified twelve times loomed in his vision.

GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME . . .

Mason had been standing directly in front of the last word.

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THE THEFT OF THE ROYAL RUBY

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

(*continued from page 53*)

Christmas dinner took place at two o'clock and was a feast indeed. Enormous logs crackled merrily in the wide fireplace and above their crackling rose the babel of many tongues talking together. Oyster soup had been consumed, two enormous turkeys had come and gone, mere carcasses of their former selves. Now, the supreme moment, the Christmas pudding was brought in—in state!

Old Peverell, his hands and knees shaking with the weakness of 80 years, permitted no one but himself to bear it in. Mrs. Lacey sat, her hands pressed together in nervous apprehension. One Christmas, she felt sure, Peverell would fall down dead. Having either to take the risk of letting him fall down dead or of hurting his feelings to such an extent that he would probably prefer to be dead than alive, she had so far chosen the former alternative.

On a silver dish the Christmas pudding reposed in its glory—a large football of a pudding with a piece of holly stuck in it like a triumphant flag and with glorious flames of blue and red rising round it. There was a cheer and cries of "Ooh-ah."

One thing Mrs. Lacey had done: she had prevailed on Peverell to set the pudding in front of her so that she could give out helpings rather than hand the whole pudding in turn round the table. She breathed a sigh of relief as it was deposited safely in front of her. Rapidly the plates were passed round, flames still licking the portions.

"Wish, Monsieur Poirot," cried Bridget. "Wish before the flame goes. Quick, Gran darling, quick."

Mrs. Lacey leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction. Operation Pudding had been a success. In front of everyone was a helping with flames still licking it. There was a momentary silence all round the table as everyone made a wish.

There was nobody to notice the rather curious expression on the face of Monsieur Poirot as he surveyed the portion of pudding on his plate. "*Don't eat none of the plum pudding.*" What on earth did that sinister warning mean? There could be nothing different about his portion of plum pudding from that of everyone else! Sighing as he admitted himself baffled—and Hercule Poirot never liked to admit himself baffled—he picked up his spoon and fork.

"Hard sauce, Monsieur Poirot?"

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Poirot helped himself appreciatively to hard sauce.

"Swiped my best brandy again, eh, Em?" said the colonel good-humoredly from the other end of the table. Mrs. Lacey twinkled at him.

"Mrs. Ross insists on having the best brandy, dear," she said. "She says it makes all the difference."

"Well, well," said Colonel Lacey, "Christmas comes but once a year and Mrs. Ross is a great woman. A great woman and a great cook."

"She is indeed," said Colin. "Smashing plum pudding, this. Mmmm." He filled an appreciative mouth.

Gently, almost gingerly, Hercule Poirot attacked his portion of pudding. He ate a mouthful. It was delicious! He ate another. Something tinkled faintly on his plate. He investigated with a fork. Bridget, on his left, came to his aid.

"You've got something, Monsieur Poirot," she said. "I wonder what it is."

Poirot detached a little silver object from the surrounding raisins.

"Oooh," said Bridget, "it's the bachelor's button! Monsieur Poirot's got the bachelor's button!"

Hercule Poirot dipped the small silver button into the finger bowl of water that stood by his plate and washed it clear of pudding crumbs.

"It is very pretty," he observed.

"That means you're going to be a bachelor, Monsieur Poirot," explained Colin helpfully.

"That is to be expected," said Poirot gravely. "I have been a bachelor for many long years and it is unlikely that I shall change that status now."

"Oh, never say die," said Michael. "I saw in the paper that someone of ninety-five married a girl of twenty-two the other day."

"You encourage me," said Hercule Poirot.

Colonel Lacey uttered a sudden exclamation. His face became purple and his hand went to his mouth.

"Confound it, Emmeline," he roared, "why on earth do you let the cook put glass in the pudding?"

"Glass!" cried Mrs. Lacey, astonished.

Colonel Lacey withdrew the offending substance from his mouth. "Might have broken a tooth," he grumbled. "Or swallowed the damn' thing and had appendicitis."

He dropped the piece of glass into the finger bowl, rinsed it, and held it up.

"God bless my soul," he exclaimed. "It's a huge red stone out of one of the cracker brooches."

"You permit?"

Very deftly Monsieur Poirot stretched across his neighbor, took it from Colonel Lacey's fingers, and examined it attentively. As the squire had said, it was an enormous red stone the color of a ruby. The light gleamed from its facets as he turned it about. Somewhere around the table a chair was pushed sharply back and then drawn in again.

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"Phew!" cried Michael. "How wizard it would be if it was *real.*"

"Perhaps it is real," said Bridget hopefully.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Bridget. Why, a ruby of that size would be worth thousands and thousands and *thousands* of pounds. Wouldn't it, Monsieur Poirot?"

"It would indeed," said Poirot.

"But what *I* can't understand," said Mrs. Lacey, "is how it got into the pudding."

"Oooh," said Colin, diverted by his last mouthful, "I've got the pig. It isn't fair."

Bridget chanted immediately, "Colin's got the pig! Colin's got the pig! Colin is the greedy guzzling *pig!*"

"I've got the ring," said Diana in a clear, high voice.

"Good for you, Diana. You'll be married first, of us all."

"I've got the thimble," wailed Bridget.

"Bridget's going to be an old maid," chanted the two boys. "Yah, Bridget's going to be an old maid."

"Who's got the money?" demanded David. "Theres' a real ten shilling piece, gold, in this pudding. I know. Mrs. Ross told me so."

"I think I'm the lucky one," said Desmond Lee-Wortley.

Colonel Lacey's two neighbors heard him mutter, "Yes, you would be."

"*I've* got a ring, too," said David. He looked across at Diana. "Quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

The laughter went on. Nobody noticed that Monsieur Poirot carelessly, as though thinking of something else, had dropped the red stone into his pocket.

Mince pies and Christmas dessert followed the pudding. The older members of the party then retired for a welcome siesta before the tea-time ceremony of the lighting of the Christmas tree. Hercule Poirot, however, did not take a siesta. Instead, he made his way to the large old-fashioned kitchen.

"It is permitted," he asked, looking round and beaming, "that I congratulate the cook on this marvelous meal that I have just eaten?"

There was a moment's pause and then Mrs. Ross came forward in a stately manner to meet him. She was a large woman, nobly built with all the dignity of a stage duchess. Two lean gray-haired women were beyond in the scullery washing up and a tow-haired girl was moving to and fro between the scullery and the kitchen. But these were obviously mere myrmidons. Mrs. Ross was the queen of the kitchen quarters.

"I am glad to hear you enjoyed it, sir," she said graciously.

"Enjoyed it!" cried Hercule Poirot. With an extravagant foreign gesture he raised his hand to his lips, kissed it, and wafted the kiss to the ceiling. "But you are a genius, Mrs. Ross! A genius! *Never* have I tasted such a wonderful meal. The oyster soup . . ." he made an expres-

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sive noise with his lips "—and the stuffing. The chestnut stuffing in the turkey, that was quite unique in my experience."

"Well, it's funny that you should say that, sir," said Mrs. Ross. "It's a very special recipe, that stuffing. It was given me by an Austrian chef that I worked with many years ago. But all the rest," she added, "is just good, plain English cooking."

"And is there anything better?" demanded Hercule Poirot.

"Well, it's nice of you to say so, sir. Of course, you being a foreign gentleman might have preferred the continental style. Not but what I can't manage continental dishes, too."

"I am sure, Mrs. Ross, you could manage anything! But you must know that English cooking—*good* English cooking, not the cooking one gets in the second-class hotels or the restaurants—is much appreciated by *gourmets* on the continent, and I believe I am correct in saying that a special expedition was made to London in the early eighteen hundreds, and a report sent back to France of the wonders of the English puddings.

"'We have nothing like that in France,' they wrote. 'It is worth making a journey to London just to taste the varieties and excellencies of the English puddings.' And above all puddings," continued Poirot, well launched now on a kind of rhapsody, "is the Christmas plum pudding, such as we have eaten today. That was a homemade pudding, was it not? Not a bought one?"

"Yes, indeed, sir. Of my own making and my own recipe such as I've made for many, many years. When I came here Mrs. Lacey said that she'd ordered a pudding from a London store to save me the trouble. But no, madame, I said, that may be kind of you but no bought pudding from a store can equal a homemade Christmas one. Mind you," said Mrs. Ross, warming to her subject like the artist she was, "is was made too soon before the day. A good Christmas pudding should be made some weeks before and allowed to wait. The longer they're kept, within reason, the better they are.

"I mind now that when I was a child and we went to church every Sunday, we'd start listening for the collect that begins 'Stir up O Lord we beseech thee' because that collect was the signal, as it were, that the puddings should be made that week. And so they always were. We had the collect on the Sunday, and that week sure enough my mother would make the Christmas puddings. And so it should have been here this year. As it was, that pudding was only made three days ago, the day you arrived, sir. However, I kept to the old custom. Everyone in the house had to come out into the kitchen and have a stir and make a wish. That's an old custom, sir, and I've always held to it."

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"Most interesting," said Hercule Poirot. "*Most* interesting. And so everyone came out into the kitchen?"

"Yes, sir. The young gentlemen, Miss Bridget and the London gentleman who's staying here, and his sister and Mr. David and Miss Diana—Mrs. Middleton, I should say . . . All had a stir, they did."

"How many puddings did you make? Is this the only one?"

"No, sir, I made four. Two large ones and two smaller ones. The other large one I planned to serve on New Year's Day and the smaller ones were for Colonel and Mrs. Lacey when they're alone like and not so many in the family."

"I see, I see," said Poirot.

"As a matter of fact, sir," said Mrs. Lacey, "it was the wrong pudding you had for lunch today."

"The wrong pudding?" Poirot frowned. "How is that?"

"Well, sir, we have a big Christmas mold—a china mold with a pattern of holly and mistletoe on top—and we always have the Christmas Day pudding boiled in that. But there was a most unfortunate accident. This morning, when Annie was getting it down from the shelf in the larder, she slipped and dropped it and it broke. Well, sir, naturally I couldn't serve that, could I? There might have been splinters in it.

"So we had to use the other one—the New Year's Day one, which is in a plain bowl. It makes a nice round but it's not so decorative as the Christmas mold. Really, where we'll get another mold like that I don't know. They don't make things in that size nowadays. All tiddly bits of things. Why, you can't even buy a breakfast dish that'll take a proper eight to ten eggs and bacon. Ah, things aren't what they were."

"No, indeed," said Poirot. "But today that is not so. This Christmas Day has been like the Christmas Days of old, is that not true?"

Mrs. Ross sighed. "Well, I'm glad you say so, sir, but of course I haven't the *help* now that I used to have. Not skilled help, that is. The girls nowadays . . ." she lowered her voice slightly "—they mean very well and they're very willing but they've not been *trained,* sir, if you understand what I mean."

"Times change, yes," said Hercule Poirot. "I, too, find it sad sometimes."

"This house, sir," said Mrs. Ross, "it's too large, you know, for the mistress and the colonel. The mistress, she knows that. Living in a corner of it as they do, it's not the same thing at all. It only comes alive, as you might say, at Christmas time when all the family come."

"It is the first time, I think, that Mr. Lee-Wortley and his sister have been here?"

"Yes, sir." A note of slight reserve crept into Mrs. Ross's voice. "A very nice gentleman he is but, well—it seems a funny friend for

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Miss Sarah to have, according to our ideas. But there—London ways are different! It's sad that his sister's so poorly. Had an operation, she had. She seemed all right the first day she was here, but that very day, after we'd been stirring the puddings, she was took bad again and she's been in bed ever since. Got up too soon after her operation, I expect. Ah, doctors nowadays, they have you out of hospital before you can hardly stand on your feet. Why, my very own nephew's wife . . ."

And Mrs. Ross went into a long and spirited tale of hospital treatment as accorded to her family, comparing it unfavorably with the consideration that had been lavishly on them in older times.

Poirot duly commiserated with her. "It remains," he said, "to thank you for this exquisite and sumptuous meal. You permit a little acknowledgment of my appreciation?"

A crisp five-pound note passed from his hand into that of Mrs. Ross who said perfunctorily, "You really shouldn't do *that,* sir."

"I insist. I insist."

"Well, it's very kind of you indeed, sir." Mrs. Ross accepted the tribute as no more than her due. "And I wish you, sir, a very happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year."

The end of Christmas Day was like the end of most Christmas Days. The tree was lighted, a splendid Christmas cake came in for tea, was greeted with approval but was partaken of only moderately. There was cold supper.

Both Poirot and his host and hostess went to bed early.

"Good night, Monsieur Poirot," said Mrs. Lacey. "I hope you've enjoyed yourself."

"It has been a wonderful day, madame, wonderful."

"You're looking very thoughtful," said Mrs. Lacey.

"It is the English pudding that I consider."

"You found it a little heavy, perhaps?" asked Mrs. Lacey delicately.

"No, no, I do not speak gastronomically. I consider its significance."

"It's traditional, of course," said Mrs. Lacey. "Well, good night, Monsieur Poirot, and don't dream too much of Christmas puddings and mince pies."

"Yes," murmured Poirot to himself as he undressed. "It is a problem certainly, that Christmas plum pudding. There is here something that I do not understand at all." He shook his head in a vexed manner. "Well—we shall see."

After making certain preparations, Poirot went to bed, but not to sleep.

It was some two hours later that his patience was rewarded. The door of his bedroom opened very gently. He smiled to himself. It was as he had thought it would be. His

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mind went back fleetingly to the cup of coffee so politely handed him by Desmond Lee-Wortley. A little later, when Desmond's back was turned, he had laid the cup down for a few moments on a table. He had then apparently picked it up again and Desmond had had the satisfaction, if satisfaction it was, of seeing him drink the coffee to the last drop.

But a little smile lifted Poirot's mustache as he reflected that it was not he but someone else who was sleeping a good sound sleep tonight. "That pleasant young David," said Poirot to himself, "he is worried, unhappy. It will do him no harm to have a night's really sound sleep. And now, let us see what will happen?"

He lay quite still, breathing in an even manner with occasionally a suggestion, but the very faintest suggestion, of a snore.

Someone came up to the bed and bent over him. Then, satisfied, that someone turned away and went to the dressing table. By the light of a tiny torch the visitor was examining Poirot's belongings neatly arranged on top of the dressing table. Fingers explored the wallet, gently pulled open the drawers of the dressing table, then extended the search to the pockets of Poirot's clothes.

Finally the visitor approached the bed and with great caution slid his hand under the pillow. Withdrawing his hand, he stood for a moment or two as though uncertain what to do next. He walked round the room looking inside ornaments, went into the adjoining bathroom from which he presently returned. Then, with a faint exclamation of disgust, he went out of the room.

"Ah," said Poirot, under his breath. "You have a disappointment. Yes, yes, a serious disappointment. Bah! To imagine, even, that Hercule Poirot would hide something where you could find it!" Then, turning over on his other side, he went peacefully to sleep.

He was aroused next morning by an urgent soft tapping on his door.

"Qui est là? Come in, come in."

The door opened. Breathless, red-faced, Colin stood on the threshold. Behind him stood Michael.

"Monsieur Poirot, Monsieur Poirot."

"But yes?" Poirot sat up in bed. "It is the early tea? But no. It is you, Colin. What has occurred?"

Colin was, for a moment, speechless. He seemed to be under the grip of some strong emotion. In actual fact it was the sight of the nightcap that Hercule Poirot wore that affected for the moment his organs of speech. Presently he controlled himself and spoke.

"I think—Monsieur Poirot, could you help us? Something rather awful has happened."

"Something has happened? But what?"

"It's—it's Bridget. She's out there

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in the snow. I think—she doesn't move or speak and—oh, you'd better come and look for yourself. I'm terribly afraid—she may be *dead.*"

"What?" Poirot cast aside his bed covers. "Mademoiselle Bridget—dead!"

"I think—I think somebody's killed her. There's—there's blood and—oh, do come!"

"But certainly! I come on the instant."

With great practicality Poirot inserted his feet into his overshoes and pulled a fur-lined overcoat over his pajamas.

"I come," he said. "I come on the moment. You have aroused the house?"

"No. No, so far I haven't told anyone but you. I thought it would be better. Grandfather and Gran aren't up yet. They're laying breakfast downstairs, but I didn't say anything to Peverell. She—Bridget—she's round the other side of the house, near the terrace and the library window."

"I see. Lead the way. I will follow."

Turning away to hide his delighted grin, Colin led the way downstairs. They went out through the side door. It was a clear morning with the sun not yet high over the horizon. It was not snowing now, but it had snowed heavily during the night and everywhere around was an unbroken carpet of thick snow. The world looked very pure and white and beautiful.

"There!" said Colin breathlessly. "I—it's—*there!*" He pointed dramatically.

The scene was indeed dramatic enough. A few yards away Bridget lay in the snow. She was wearing scarlet pajamas and a white wool wrap thrown round her shoulders. The white wool wrap was stained with crimson. Her head was turned aside and hidden by the mass of her outspread black hair. One arm was under her body, the other lay flung out, the fingers clenched, and standing up in the center of the crimson stain was the hilt of a large curved Kurdish knife which Colonel Lacey had shown to his guests only the evening before.

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed M. Poirot. "It is like something on the stage!"

There was a faint choking noise from Michael. Colin thrust himself quickly into the breach.

"I know," he said. "It—it doesn't seem *real* somehow, does it? Do you see those footprints—I suppose we mustn't disturb them?"

"Ah, yes, the footprints. No, we must be careful not to disturb those footprints."

"That's what I thought," said Colin. "That's why I wouldn't let anyone go near her until we got you. I thought you'd know what to do."

"All the same," said Hercule Poirot briskly, "first, we must see if she is still alive? Is not that so?"

"Well—yes—of course," said

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Michael a little doubtfully, "but you see, we thought—I mean, we didn't like . . ."

"Ah, you have the prudence! You have read the detective stories. It is most important that nothing should be touched and that the body should be left as it is. But we cannot be sure as yet if it *is* a body, can we? After all, though prudence is admirable, common humanity comes first. We must think of the doctor, must we not, before we think of the police?"

"Oh, yes. Of course," said Colin, still a little taken aback.

"We only thought—I mean—we thought we'd better get you before we did anything," said Michael hastily.

"Then you will both remain here," said Poirot. "I will approach from the other side so as not to disturb these footprints. Such excellent footprints, are they not—so very clear? The footprints of a man and a girl going out together to the place where she lies. And then the man's footsteps come back but the girl's—do not."

"They must be the footprints of the murderer," said Colin.

"Exactly," said Poirot. "The footprint of the murderer. A long narrow foot with rather a peculiar type of shoe. Very interesting. Easy, I think, to recognize. Yes, those footprints will be very important."

At that moment Desmond Lee-Wortley came out of the house with Sarah and joined them.

"What on earth are you all doing here?" he demanded in a somewhat theatrical manner. "I saw you from my bedroom window. What's up? Good lord, what's this? It—it looks like . . ."

"Exactly," said Hercule Poirot. "It looks like murder, does it not?"

Sarah gave a gasp, then shot a quick suspicious glance at the two boys.

"You mean someone killed the girl—what's-her-name—Bridget?" demanded Desmond. "Who on earth would want to kill her? It's unbelievable!"

"There are many things that are unbelievable," said Poirot. "Especially before breakfast, is it not? That is what one of your classics says. Six impossible things before breakfast." He added, "Please wait here, all of you."

Carefully making a circuit, he approached Bridget and bent for a moment over the body. Colin and Michael were now both shaking with suppressed laughter. Sarah joined them, murmuring, "What have you two been up to?"

"Good old Bridget," whispered Colin. "Isn't she wonderful? Not a twitch!"

"I've never seen anything look so dead as Bridget does," whispered Michael.

Hercule Poirot straightened up.

"This is a terrible thing," he said. His voice held an emotion it had not held before.

Overcome by mirth, Michael and

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Colin both turned away. In a choked voice Michael said, "What—what must we do?"

"There is only one thing to do," said Poirot. "We must send for the police. Will one of you telephone or would you prefer me to do it?"

"I think," said Colin, "I think—what about it, Michael?"

"Yes," said Michael, "I think the jig's up now." He stepped forward. For the first time he seemed a little unsure of himself. "I'm awfully sorry," he said, "I hope you won't mind too much. It—er—it was a sort of joke for Christmas and all that, you know. We thought we'd—well, lay on a murder for you."

"You thought you would lay on a murder for me? Then this—then this . . ."

"It's just a show we put on," explained Colin, "to—to make you feel at home, you know."

"Aha," said Hercule Poirot. "I understand. You make of me the April fool, is that it? But today is not April the first, it is December the twenty-sixth."

"I suppose we oughtn't to have done it really," said Colin, "but—but—you don't mind very much, do you, Monsieur Poirot? Come on, Bridget," he called, "get up. You must be half frozen to death already."

The figure in the snow, however, did not stir.

"It is odd," said Hercule Poirot, "she does not seem to hear you." He looked thoughtfully at them. "It is a joke, you say? You are sure this is a joke?"

"Why, yes." Colin spoke uncomfortably. "We—we didn't mean any harm."

"But why then does Mademoiselle Bridget not get up?"

"I can't imagine," said Colin.

"Come on, Bridget," said Sarah impatiently. "Don't go on lying there playing the fool."

"We really are very sorry, Monsieur Poirot," said Colin apprehensively. "We do really apologize."

"You need not apologize," said Poirot, in a peculiar tone.

"What do you mean?" Colin stared at him. He turned again. "Bridget! Bridget! What's the matter? Why doesn't she get up? Why does she go on lying there?"

Poirot beckoned to Desmond. "*You,* Mr. Lee-Wortley. Come here."

Desmond joined him.

"Feel her pulse," said Poirot.

Desmond Lee-Wortley bent down. He touched the arm—the wrist.

"There's no pulse . . ." He stared at Poirot. "Her arm's stiff. Good God, she really *is* dead!"

Poirot nodded. "Yes, she is dead," he said. "Someone has turned the comedy into a tragedy."

"Someone—who?"

"There is a set of footprints going and returning. A set of footprints that bears a strong resemblance to the footprints *you* have just made, Mr. Lee-Wortley."

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Desmond Lee-Wortley wheeled round.

"Are you accusing me? *ME?* You're crazy! Why on earth should I want to kill the girl?"

"Ah—why? I wonder . . . Let us see . . ."

He bent down and very gently prised open the stiff fingers of the girl's clenched hand.

Desmond drew a sharp breath. He gazed down unbelievingly. In the palm of the dead girl's hand was what appeared to be a large ruby.

"It's that damn' thing out of the pudding!" he cried.

"Is it?" said Poirot. "Are you sure?"

"Of course it is."

With a swift movement Desmond bent down and plucked the red stone out of Bridget's hand.

"You should not do that," said Poirot reproachfully. "Nothing should have been disturbed."

"I haven't disturbed the body, have I? But this thing might—might get lost and it's evidence. I'll go at once and telephone."

He wheeled round and ran toward the house. Sarah came swiftly to Poirot's side.

"I don't understand," she whispered. Her face was dead-white. "I don't *understand.*" She caught at Poirot's arm. "What did you mean about—about the footprints?"

"Look for yourself, mademoiselle."

The footprints that led to the body and back again were the same as the ones just made accompanying Poirot to the girl's body and back.

"You mean—that it was Desmond? Nonsense!"

Suddenly the noise of a car came through the clear air. They turned and saw the car driving at a furious pace down the drive.

"It's Desmond," Sarah said. "It's Desmond's car. He—he must have gone to fetch the police instead of telephoning."

Diana Middleton came running out of the house to join them.

"What's happened?" she cried in a breathless voice. "Desmond just came rushing into the house. He said something about Bridget being killed and then he rattled the telephone but it was dead. He couldn't get any answer. He said the wires must have been cut. He said the only thing was to take a car and go for the police. Why the police?"

Poirot made a gesture.

"Bridget?" Diana stared at him. "But surely—isn't it a joke of some kind? I heard something—something last night. I thought that they were going to play a joke on you, Monsieur Poirot?"

"Yes," said Poirot, "that was the idea—to play a joke on me. But now come into the house, all of you. We shall catch our deaths of cold here and there is nothing to be done until Mr. Lee-Wortley returns with the police."

"But look here," said Colin, "we

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can't—we can't leave Bridget here alone."

"You can do her no good by remaining," said Poirot gently. "Come, it is a sad, a very sad tragedy, but there is nothing we can do any more to help Mademoiselle Bridget. So let us come in and get warm and have a cup of tea."

They followed him obediently into the house. Peverell was just about to ring the gong. If he thought it extraordinary for most of the household to be outside and for Poirot to make an appearance in pajamas and an overcoat, he displayed no sign of it. Peverell in his old age was still the perfect butler. He noticed nothing that he was not asked to notice.

They went into the dining room and sat down. When they all had a cup of tea in front of them and were sipping it, Poirot spoke.

"I have to recount to you," he said, "a little history. I cannot tell you all the details, no. But I can give you the main outline. It concerns a young princeling who came to this country. He brought with him a famous jewel which he was to have reset for the lady he was going to marry, but unfortunately before that he made friends with a very pretty young lady. This pretty young lady did not care very much for the man, but she did care for his jewel—so much so that one day she disappeared with this historic possession which had belonged to his house for generations.

"So the poor young man, he is in a quandary, you see. Above all he cannot have a scandal. Impossible to go to the police. Therefore he comes to me, to Hercule Poirot. 'Recover for me,' he says, 'my historic ruby.' *Eh bien,* this young lady, she has a friend and the friend, he has put through several very questionable transactions. He has been concerned with blackmail and he has been concerned with the sale of jewelry abroad. Always he has been very clever. He is suspected, yes, but nothing can be proved.

"It comes to my knowledge that this very clever gentleman, he is spending Christmas here in this house. It is important that the pretty young lady, once she has acquired the jewel, should disappear for a while from circulation, so that no pressure can be put upon her, no questions can be asked her. It is arranged, therefore, that she comes here to Kings Lacey, ostensibly as the sister of the clever gentleman . . ."

Sarah drew a sharp breath.

"Oh, no. Oh, no, not *here!* Not with me here!"

"But so it is," said Poirot. "And by a little manipulation, I, too, become a guest here for Christmas. This young lady, she is supposed to have just come out of the hospital. She is much better when she arrives here. But then comes the news that I, too, arrive, a detective—a well-known detective. At once she has what you call the wind up.

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"She hides the ruby in the first place she can think of, and then very quickly she has a relapse and takes to her bed again. She does not want that I should see her, for doubtless I have a photograph and I shall recognize her. It is very boring for her, yes, but she has to stay in her room and her 'brother,' he brings her up the trays."

"And the ruby?" demanded Michael.

"I think," said Poirot, "that at the moment it is mentioned I arrive, the young lady was in the kitchen with the rest of you, all laughing and talking and stirring the Christmas puddings. The Christmas puddings are put into bowls and the young lady she hides the ruby, pressing it down into one of the pudding bowls. Not the one that we are going to have on Christmas Day. Oh no, that one she knows is in a special mold.

"She puts it in the other one, the one that is destined to be eaten on New Year's Day. Before then she will be ready to leave, and when she leaves no doubt that Christmas pudding will go with her. But see how fate takes a hand. On the very morning of Christmas Day there is an accident. The Christmas pudding in its fancy mold is dropped on the stone floor and the mold is shattered to pieces. So what can be done? The good Mrs. Ross, she takes the other pudding—the New Year's Day pudding—and sends it in."

"Good lord," said Colin, "do you mean that on Christmas Day when Grandfather was eating his pudding that that was a real ruby he'd got in his mouth?"

"Precisely," said Poirot, "and you can imagine the emotions of Mr. Desmond Lee-Wortley when he saw that. *Eh bien,* what happens next? The royal ruby is passed round. I examine it and I manage unobtrusively to slip it in my pocket. In a careless way as though I were not interested. But one person at least observes what I have done. When I lie in bed that person searches my room. He searches me. He does not find the ruby. Why?"

"Because," said Michael breathlessly, "you had given it to Bridget. That's what you mean. And so that's why—but I don't understand quite—I mean . . . Look here, what *did* happen?"

Poirot smiled at him.

"Come now into the library," he said, "and look out of the window and I will show you something that may explain the mystery."

He led the way.

"Consider once again," said Poirot, "the scene of the crime."

He pointed out of the window. A simultaneous gasp broke from the lips of all of them. There was no body lying on the snow, no trace of the tragedy seemed to remain except a mass of scuffled snow.

"It wasn't all a dream, was it?" said Colin faintly. "I—has someone taken the body away?"

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"Ah," said Poirot. "You see? The Mystery of the Disappearing Body." He nodded his head and his eyes twinkled gently.

"Good lord," cried Michael. "Monsieur Poirot, you are—you haven't—oh, look here, he's been having *us* on all this time!"

Poirot twinkled more than ever.

"It is true, my children, I also have had my little joke. I knew about your little plot, you see, and so I arranged a counterplot of my own. Ah, *voilà* Mademoiselle Bridget. None the worse, I hope, for your exposure in the snow? Never should I forgive myself if you *attrapped une fluxion de poitrine.*"

Bridget had just come into the room. She was wearing a thick skirt and a woolen sweater, and was laughing.

"I sent a *tisane* to your room," said Poirot severely. "You have drunk it?"

"One sip was enough!" said Bridget. "Did I do it well, Monsieur Poirot? Goodness, my arm hurts still after that tourniquet you made me put on it."

"You were splendid, my child," said Poirot. "Splendid. But see, all the others are still in the fog. Last night I went to Mademoiselle Bridget. I told her that I knew about your little *complot* and I asked her if she would act a part for me. She did it very cleverly. She made the footprints with a pair of Mr. Lee-Wortley's shoes."

Sarah said in a harsh voice, "But what's the point of it all, Monsieur Poirot? What's the point of sending Desmond off to fetch the police? They'll be very angry when they find out it's nothing but a hoax."

Poirot shook his head gently.

"But I do not think for one moment, Mademoiselle, that Mr. Lee-Wortley went to fetch the police," he said. "Murder is a thing in which Mr. Lee-Wortley does not want to be mixed up. He lost his nerve badly. All he could see was his chance to get the ruby. He snatched that, he pretended the telephone was out of order, and he rushed off in a car on the pretense of fetching the police. I think myself it is the last you will see of him for some time. He has, I understand, his own ways of getting out of England. He has his own plane, has he not, mademoiselle?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes," she said. "We were thinking of . . ." She stopped.

"He wanted you to elope with him that way, did he not? *Eh bien,* that is a very good way of smuggling a jewel out of the country. When you are eloping with a girl, and that fact is publicized, then you will not be suspected of also smuggling a historic jewel out of the country. Oh, yes, that would have made a very good *camouflage.*"

"I don't believe it," said Sarah. "I don't believe a word of it!"

"Then ask his sister," said Poirot, gently nodding his head over

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her shoulder. Sarah turned her head sharply.

A platinum blonde stood in the doorway. She wore a fur coat and was scowling. She was clearly in a furious temper.

"Sister my foot!" she said, with a short unpleasant laugh. "That swine's no brother of mine! So he's beaten it, has he, and left me to carry the can? The whole thing was *his* idea! *He* put me up to it! Said it was money for jam. They'd never prosecute because of the scandal. I could always threaten to say that Ali had *given* me his historic jewel. Des and I were to have shared the swag in Paris—and now the swine runs out on me! I'd like to murder him!" She switched abruptly. "The sooner I get out of here . . . Can someone telephone for a taxi?"

"A car is waiting at the front door to take you to the station, mademoiselle," said Poirot.

"Think of everything, don't you?"

"Most things," said Poirot complacently.

But Poirot was not to get off so easily. When he returned to the dining room after assisting the spurious Miss Lee-Wortley into the waiting car, Colin was waiting for him.

There was a frown on his boyish face.

"But look here, Monsieur Poirot. *What about the ruby?* Do you mean you've let him get away with it?"

Poirot's face fell. He twirled his mustache. He seemed ill at ease.

"I shall recover it yet," he said weakly. "There are other ways. I shall still . . ."

"Well, I do think!" said Michael. "To let that swine get away with the ruby!"

Bridget was sharper.

"He's having us on again," she cried, "You are, aren't you, Monsieur Poirot?"

"Shall we do a final conjuring trick, Mademoiselle? Feel in my left-hand pocket."

Bridget thrust her hand in. She drew it out with a scream of triumph and held aloft a large ruby blinking in crimson splendor.

"You comprehend," explained Poirot, "the one that was clasped in your hand was a paste replica. I brought it from London in case it was possible to make a substitution. You understand? We do not want the scandal. Monsieur Desmond will try and dispose of that ruby in Paris or in Belgium or wherever it is that he has his contacts, and then it will be discovered that the stone is not real! What could be more excellent? All finishes happily. The scandal is avoided, my princeling receives his ruby back again, he returns to his country and makes a sober and we hope a happy marriage. All ends well."

"Except for me," murmured Sarah under her breath.

She spoke so low that no one heard her but Poirot. He shook his head gently.

"You are in error, Mademoiselle

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Sarah, in what you say there. You have gained experience. All experience is valuable. Ahead of you I prophesy there lies happiness."

"That's what *you* say," said Sarah.

"But look here, Monsieur Poirot," Colin was frowning. "How did you know about the show we were going to put on for you?"

"It is my business to know things," said Hercule Poirot.

"Yes, but I don't see how you could have managed it. Did someone come and tell you?"

"No, no, not that."

"Then how? Tell us how?"

"But no," Poirot protested. "But no. If I tell you how I deduced that, you will think nothing of it. It is like the conjuror who shows how his tricks are done!"

"Now, come on, Monsieur Poirot. *How did you know?"*

"Well, you see, I was sitting in the library by the window in a chair after tea the other day and I was reposing myself. I had been asleep and when I awoke you were discussing your plans just outside the window close to me, and the window was open at the top."

"Is that all?" cried Colin, disgusted. "How simple!"

"Is it not?" cried Hercule Poirot, smiling. "You see? You *are* disappointed!"

"Oh, well," said Michael, "at any rate we know everything now."

"Do we?" murmured Hercule Poirot to himself. *"I* do not. *I* whose business it is to know everything."

He walked out into the hall, shaking his head a little. For perhaps the twentieth time he drew from his pocket a rather dirty piece of paper. "DON'T EAT NONE OF THE PLUM PUDDING. ONE AS WISHES YOU WELL."

Hercule Poirot shook his head reflectively. He who could explain everything could not explain this! Humiliating. Who had written it? *Why* had it been written? Until he found that out he would never know a moment's peace.

Suddenly he came out of his reverie to be aware of a peculiar gasping noise. He looked sharply down. On the floor, busy with a dustpan and brush was a towheaded creature in a flowered coverall. She was staring at the paper in his hand with large round eyes.

"Oh, sir," said this apparition. "Oh, *sir. Please,* sir."

"And who may you be, *mon enfant?"* inquired Poirot genially.

"Annie Bates, sir. I come here to help Mrs. Ross. I didn't mean to—to do anything what I shouldn't do. I did mean it well, sir. For your good, I mean."

Enlightenment came to Poirot. He held out the piece of paper.

"Did you write that, Annie?"

"I didn't mean any harm, sir."

"Of course you didn't, Annie." He smiled at her. "But tell me about it. Why did you write this?"

"Well, it was them two, sir. Mr.

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Lee-Wortley and his sister. Not that she *was* his sister, I'm sure. None of us thought so! And she wasn't ill a bit. We could all tell *that*. We thought—we all thought—something queer was going on. I'll tell you straight, sir. I was in her bathroom taking in the clean towels, and I listened at the door. *He* was in her room and they were talking together. I heard what they said plain as plain.

" 'This detective,' he was saying. 'This fellow Poirot who's coming here. We've got to do something about it. We've got to get him out of the way as soon as possible.' And then he says to her in a nasty, sinister sort of way, lowering his voice, 'Where did you put it?' And she answered him, *'In the pudding.'*

"Oh, sir, my heart gave such a leap I thought it would stop beating. I thought they meant to poison you in the Christmas pudding. I didn't know *what* to do! Mrs. Ross, she wouldn't listen to the likes of me. Then the idea came to me as I'd write you a warning. And I did and I put it on your pillow where you'd find it when you went to bed." Annie paused breathlessly.

Poirot surveyed her gravely.

"You see too many sensational films, I think, Annie," he said at last, "or perhaps it is the television that affects you? But the important thing is that you have the good heart and a certain amount of ingenuity. When I return to London I will send you a present."

"Oh, thank you, sir. Thank you very much, sir."

"What would you like, Annie, as a present?"

"Anything I like, sir? Could I have anything I like?"

"Within reason," said Hercule Poirot prudently, "yes."

"Oh, sir, could I have a vanity box? A real posh slap-up vanity box like the one Mr. Lee-Wortley's sister wot wasn't his sister, had?"

"Yes," said Poirot, "yes, I think that could be managed. It is interesting," he mused. "I was in a museum the other day observing some antiquities from Babylon or one of those places, thousands of years old—and among them were cosmetics boxes. The heart of woman does not change."

"Beg your pardon, sir?" said Annie.

"It is nothing," said Poirot, "I reflect. You shall have your vanity box, child."

Annie departed ecstatically. Poirot looked after her, nodding his head in satisfaction.

"Ah," he said to himself. "And now—I go. There is nothing more to be done here."

A pair of arms slipped round his shoulders unexpectedly.

"If you *will* stand just under the mistletoe . . ." said Bridget.

Hercule Poirot enjoyed it. He enjoyed it very much. He said to himself that he had had a very good Christmas.

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—Anthony Boucher
The New York Times Book Review,
October 30, 1966

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THE JUSTICE OF SOLOMON

by JUAN PAGE

O Solomon! King of Kings, Judge of Judges, Blessed of the Lord, rich in wisdom and wise in riches, may your seed live forever!

I now humbly offer the closing argument in behalf of my client, Simeon ben Levi. We do not dispute the unhappy facts of the case; we admit that on the sixth day of Tishri in the thirty-third year of your illustrious reign, Simeon did slay his neighbor, Naboth ben Judah, and did take unto himself all that of which Naboth was possessed. We admit the murder, but, O Great Solomon, would you punish the hawk for swooping at the heron? Would you punish the jackal for devouring the cony? Would you punish the lion for destroying the hart? O Prince of Justice, these are as the Lord made them, and the Lord, blessed be He, made Simeon a man, a man with the acquisitive heart of a man, a man who was tempted beyond his strength and did no more than the hawk, the jackal, and the lion.

Picture, O King, Simeon and Naboth, neighbors, one rich and one poor, one possessed of vast herds and one with but a single ewe lamb. Naboth labors industriously on his land, singing his joy of life and praising the Lord; Simeon, consumed by jealousy, sickens and watches him over the wall, a taste of ashes in his throat and envy in his heart. Can you blame him? One has nearly all, and one has nearly nothing.

Weigh it, O Solomon, a thousand sheep against one ewe lamb, vast estates against one small field, servants and handmaidens against one worn wife. The situation was intolerable, so Simeon slew his neighbor. But do not punish him, O King, for being as the Lord made him.

The Lord, blessed be He, has given unto each creature its nature—unto the hawk, the jackal, the lion, and man. It is the nature of the rich to covet the possessions of the poor, and so, tempted beyond endurance by the one ewe lamb of his poor neighbor, Simeon slew him and took for himself that one ewe lamb without which his herds were as nothing in his sight.

Spare Simeon, O Solomon, for the Lord, praised be His Name, made him a rich man, and he only acted as a rich man must.

I thank you, Great King. The Defense rests.

CHALLENGE TO THE READER: *What was the decision of Solomon, King of Kings, Judge of Judges? . . . For our own humble conjecture see page 53.*

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CRHYMES

by RICHARD M. GORDON

Edgar Allan Poem

It did Dupin no good to tell
The *flics* who murdered Mademoiselle
And Madame L'E. with gore and grue
Upon that aptly titled rue;
The Sûreté still could not hang
The criminal Ourang-Outang.

Sherlock Homage

A Hound of Hell was sent to kill
The bad Sir Hugo Baskerville,
And then, at least so it appears,
It hung around for years and years
To dine on old Sir Hugo's heirs.
It was a sad state of affairs,
But it was fixed up nice and neat
By Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street.

A Study in Brown

Father Brown alone could see
The man who killed invisibly,
The man who used his deadly knife
To rob rich little Smythe of life;
The others thought it was a ghost—
'Twas just the chap who brought the post.

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One of the most unusual and distinguished stories EQMM has ever published . . .

KING OF THE AIR

by CHRISTIANNA BRAND

BUZZARDS YOU MIGHT SEE A-plenty; but the kite, the majestic kite—he was rare, and being rare, was precious. Perhaps a dozen pairs were left in the whole of Great Britain; and Miss Bellingham actually had a pair nesting on her land.

If a pair of kites nested on your land and reared their young, you were awarded a bounty; and Miss Bellingham duly received her bounty. Not that she needed an odd five pounds—she was well enough off and if she chose to live in a cottage in the deep heart of Wales, if she had made it as comfortable as a rather stout elderly lady could require and lived there solely because she preferred to, that was her personal business.

No, it was not the money; it was the pride—the pride and the feeling that from now on these kites belonged to *her*. She took to keeping an account of their movements, sending off innumerable postcards to the official guardians of kites, full of information, and confirmation or denial of information, already perfectly well-known to them. The guardians threw the postcards away; all they required of Miss Bellingham was that she should protect the nest.

And she did protect it. Not a soul was allowed near the cottage or in the surrounding woods; in sunshine and in rain she patrolled her few acres and drove away all who might disturb the great one and his queen. Not that there were many visitors —the cottage was too remotely situated to be troubled by more than an occasional motoring tourist, probing into the lonely, lovely valleys for more scenic delights; but the kindly farmers would every now and again jog over in their land-rovers, up Miss Bellingham's rutty lane, "just to see if the old lady's all right"—and by no means appreciated being turned back with brusque assurances that she lacked for nothing and would have to say goodbye now as she was very busy.

For of course she said nothing of the nesting kites; above all one must keep them secret against the curious, the predatory, the undisciplined ignorant; and from the irreverent.

The years passed, the kites moved elsewhere to nest; but his lordship still visited Miss Bellingham's land —sailing over, high, serene, majestical, whenever the whim seized him, and always to Miss Bellingham's delight. *Kite visited today,*

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twelve noon, she would write on a postcard to the kite guardians, perhaps once a week; in a life almost totally devoid of other incident this was always a red-letter day.

Others must watch for the long forked tail, for the glint of russet, for the crook of the wingtips, to distinguish the kite from the blunt-rumped buzzard; but not Miss Bellingham. She knew him for himself—for his lazy sweep of the air he owned, for the swift controlled swoop, for the calm, unhurried return, slowly upward-circling into the blue remoteness of his kingdom. The buzzard might be hustled and harried by raven flocks; the lord of the air sailed on through the scruffy ranks, unruffled, and the foe fell back . . .

The seasons came and went and spring came; and in April—surprisingly in those parts where even in the heart of winter a bitter cold is unusual—came the snow. At the first sign of it, while the country was still an exquisite pearly green not yet blotted out by white, came the farmers, bucketing and sliding up and down the steep hills with chains on their wheels.

"Better get out, Miss Bellingham, while you can. You know what it's like here when the snow drifts—this road will be impassable, it always is. And who knows how long it will last? Better get out."

But Miss Bellingham had no intention of getting out. Every winter her relatives came and forced her away, took her to homes where, long used to her solitudes, she felt cramped, harassed, ill at ease. But they would not discover, until it was too late to reach her, the news of snow in these faraway valleys; she would escape them this time.

On the other hand, she could not have the farmers struggling over—she had no telephone—fighting their way through to her, just because she chose to be obstinate and remain. "It's all arranged for," she lied. "My nephew will be coming for me later today. You know they never leave me here in hard weather. Yes, he's coming for me today."

They went away, reassured, and passed the word round the tiny community. No need to worry about Miss Bellingham—her family was taking her to safety till the snow was gone. Miss Bellingham sighed happily and settled down to her self-created besiegement.

The small birds were grateful for her presence, poor little things—the sparrow, the robin, the tiny Jenny Wren, and of course the sly jackdaw with his monastic gray cowl. And seeing them all feeding there as the bitter weather went on, the buzzards swooped down also, to see what was going on. And then one day—one day, royalty itself: her kite.

Who said that wild creatures couldn't be taught by man? The buzzards, consistently driven off by her flapping arms and screeching voice, soon learned to come no more. The kite, on the other hand, enticed

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with lumps of meat from the deep-freeze, soon knew he was welcome. At first she must go far afield to tempt him down, slipping and stumbling over the frozen paths, over the fields when the paths became indistinguishable from the rest of the land, to place the offerings only as near as his wary aloofness would permit.

But soon, because her legs were growing weak under the unaccustomed exercise, she must place the lumps of meat closer; and still he came, and came nearer, starved into daring, until one day he took meat from the wooden table set up just outside her door where in summertime she would sit and take her own meals—took meat from the very table where Miss Bellingham herself would eat. From within her small deep-set cottage window she watched him and could have cried for joy. She had taken the King's Bounty; now she would earn it and place him forever in her debt.

She could send no postcards; the postwoman came no more, crawling like a bug in her little green car up the twisty lane; but Miss Bellingham started a diary in an old exercise book: *Today, April 6th, kite approached within two yards of house. Quite true that rim of eye is pronounced yellow. Eye very bright and proud.*

The days passed, the snow no longer fell but still lay deep, windswept into drifts along the lane, leveling the fields into flat white sheets, damming up, icing over, the sluggish stream. No thaw came. The resources of the deep-freeze began to get low, and Miss Bellingham cut down the kite's ration and her own.

He came regularly now to the table; he had seen her watching from the window and after the first shock and swift evading flight, took no further heed of her. For more and more it was becoming an effort for her to get out to the table; the snow, iced over by the back-and-forth passing of her feet on her errands of mercy, had grown skiddy and treacherous. Once or twice she slipped and fell, and the effort of raising herself again to her feet made her heart thump and her mind grow gray and blurred.

One day, standing at the table with the meat in her hand, she felt suddenly strangely ill and was obliged to sit down abruptly in the old wooden armchair and let the world swim round her in a swirling of darkness and light. And her hand dropped the meat without volition and somehow—somehow it came to her that time had passed without her knowing anything of it. The kite was wheeling close above her head; he had not been there before. "I have had a little faint," she said to herself. But she knew it was more than that.

The kite hardly waited for her slow stumbling return inside the cottage before he swooped down upon the meat. *Kite came within*

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five feet, she wrote in the diary. *True that bill is strongly hooked.*

The next day she waited, very, very quiet, only halfway to the table—and again down he came; and that afternoon she stayed even nearer the table; and still he came. It was very cold waiting there—but worth it, worth it! One day, she thought, if the freeze lasts long enough, if I am patient enough—he will take the meat from my hand.

She ate very little now. The other birds had finished her store of frozen fruit and vegetables and nowadays sought elsewhere—or sought no more, poor little things, clamped frozen to the frozen twigs. And the bread was all gone and even such meat as she allowed herself, she begrudged for the kite's sake. And there came another of the little fainting spells and this time a numbness of her left arm and leg; and Miss Bellingham recognized, in a mind growing increasingly woolly and vague, that she could not go on much longer. And if she were to die—who then was going to feed the kite?

She feared that she would have the strength for very few more journeys out to the table. Fortunately she had, while she still could, removed what was left of the meat from the depths of the refrigerator: the weather was sufficiently cold to keep it wholesome and the kite could not have eaten it frozen solid. She looked at the meat despairingly—so little left that she must eke it out day by day: if she were to place it all out on the table in one last great effort, would he not take it all at once and then have none left for the rest of the time until the thaw came? Might not—worse and worse—the buzzards return and seeing the meat there, unguarded, swoop down and help themselves?

I would have liked before I die, she confided to the diary, painfully scrawling with her stub of pencil, *to have had him take the meat from my hand, just once.*

And that day—that very day—he did. Limping and struggling, dragging herself by slow painful inches, she had got out to the table and there collapsed again into the chair and for a long time lay sprawled there, the meat still held in her outstretched hand. So long, indeed, that the kite grew weary of circling, unobserved, above the old gray tumbled head, and came down closer, closer—closer; and since the enemy made no move, swooped at last and with a wild snatch tore the food from her lax fingers and with two great thrashing flaps of dappled brown wings, soared up again into the whiteness of the sky.

The violence of his up-winging awakened and startled her. She felt very ill and the halting journey back inside the house took longer than it ever had before. But that night she scrawled triumphantly in her dairy: *Not true that kite will not feed from the human hand.*

The next day she retained her

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consciousness but lay as she had before, across the table; only this time she watched him. The cold was bitter, but wrapped in her old winter coat she seemed, strangely, hardly to suffer from it, sitting there hour after hour waiting for his coming, the meat held out temptingly; waiting, when the meat was gone, to gather her strength to make the slow creeping journey indoors again.

That night she did not undress, just lay down beside the warm electric radiator and slept her oddly untroubled sleep, building up courage for the next day's effort. But again that evening she had been able to record faithfully in the diary: *Kite alighted on table, took food from hand, ate it close by. Beak very fierce and strong. True that crown of head is almost white.*

But still the freeze held; and now there was meat for only one more day.

She sat for a long time that morning, pressing against the warm radiator, thinking. No more food for the kite; and if the cold lasted much longer—already it must be unprecedented for this time of year—what would become of him? What would become of him, her love, her lord, her king of the air?

No man in all her life had claimed ascendancy over the heart of Miss Bellingham; mind and body, she had remained all too free of the dominance of the male over feminine frailty; in her youth much longed for, in age deeply regretted—the sweet, the easeful submission to a strength superior to her own. Now into her blurred mind, shot through with fantasies of that long-ago starved youth, had come some hazy recognition that here he was at last—her overlord, to be submitted to, sacrificed to, body and soul. . . .

Alive I have served him, she wrote, the letters straggling crazily across the page of her diary; *why shouldn't I, dead, serve him still? In life I have suffered in serving him. I shan't suffer when I am dead.*

And she struggled out of the old coat and thinly clad, carrying only the diary and stub of pencil, with the last of the meat, she made the painful journey, crawling now on hands and knees, out to the table; and hoisted herself up somehow and once again, exhausted by the effort, fell back unconscious in the wooden armchair.

And this time when she awoke to sensibility, sensibility was indeed almost all that remained to her. In the right hand a little strength, in the left less, not enough any longer to move the dead weight of even her hand. Willing or not, now there was no more possibility of changing her mind. The die was cast: at this sacrificial altar, the victim had tethered herself without hope of escape. Painfully she wrote in the diary: *Do not be distressed. It is what I have chosen to do.*

The whirr of his wings was like thunder as he swooped. Proud as a king, an emperor, proud as a god—

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scornful of danger now, he strutted, with a click of curved talons, the bleached silver of the birchwood boards. Fierce was the yellow-rimmed brilliance of his pale eye, sizing her up.

Feebly she added a note in the diary: *He is only waiting till I am*— the writing tailed off.

And she wrote once more—how much later, how many hours or even days later, who could tell? They found the words, almost indecipherable, straggling across the blood-stained page.

Not true

Not true that the bird of prey waits to feed until the victim is dead.

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Robert Twohy has proved in the pages of EQMM that he can write a story of the absurd, and then, merely shifting gears, swerve from the bizarre and the abnormal (admitting that's only a point of view) to a story of the sane, normal, and real (also a point of view) . . . In "The Man on the Spot"—which, you'll find, has different levels of meaning —Mr. Twohy introduces a new detective: Sergeant Sam Gardner of the Belle View Police Department, a character so convincing that he'll get under your skin . . .

THE MAN ON THE SPOT

by ROBERT TWOHY

THE MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN was found in the front seat of her three-year-old sedan, her torso across the seat, the ignition on, as if she had fallen while starting the car. A large hole showed in the back of her head. There wasn't much of her forehead left.

The bullet had gone through the windshield, struck the brick side wall of the Olympic Theatre, and bounced back into the parking lot, where it was found by Sergeant Samuel Gardner. The bullet was a .32.

Gardner, who had noticed that the car was the last one in the Olympic parking lot, had driven his prowl car over to check it out; it was a little after 1:30 on a cold, moonless Saturday morning in March. He had then radioed the news into the station.

The fact that he was the officer who had discovered the crime put him in charge of the case. That was the procedure with the Belle View Police Department—the officer first on the scene, whether the case was a homicide or a 502, took over.

On the floor in the back of the murder car Gardner found a .32 cartridge case. On the seat by the woman's head there was an open purse, but no wallet and no money inside.

The Olympic Theatre was on the corner of State and Parkway. Across the street was the Southern Pacific depot. Gardner, standing by the car and waiting for officers to arrive from the station, happened to glance over that way, and saw the shape of a man in the shadows of the depot.

He drew his pistol and ran toward him, shouting, "Hold it! Raise your hands! Stand where you are!"

The man stood there trembling. He was pale and sickly-looking, about 35 years old, wearing a ragged and dirty gray overcoat.

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Gardner rapped out, "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for the train to San Francisco."

"It doesn't come through until two thirty. You a stranger in town?"

"Yes, sir. I just come up this evening."

Gardner frisked him quickly and felt a bulge under the overcoat. He flipped the buttons open, reached inside the jacket underneath, and took from an inside pocket a green imitation-leather wallet.

"This yours?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're lying. It's a lady's wallet." He unsnapped it, poked his fingers around inside, and pulled out a California driver's license issued to Ellen Thayer. The photo on it showed the face of the woman in the car.

"What's your name?"

"Jack Scott."

"What'd you do with the gun?"

"What gun?"

"You don't deny you killed the woman over there in the car, do you?"

"I don't know anything about any woman in a car."

"Let's go."

Gardner marched him at gunpoint across the street. Scott moved on shaky legs. His veined nose and heavy-lidded eyes were evidence of the heavy drinker.

Two police cars came up as Gardner got back to the Olympic parking lot. Lieutenant Woodruff thrust his broad pale face toward Gardner. "What have you got, Sam?"

"A murder. Woman shot to death in that car."

"Who's that?"

"Name's Jack Scott. He had the woman's wallet in his pocket."

"I didn't kill nobody." Scott licked his quivering lips. He glanced in the car. "My God!"

"Never saw her before, huh?"

"Never did—no, sir! I found that wallet over by the depot."

"Sure." Woodruff had handcuffs out. He snapped them on Scott's thin wrists.

Gardner said, "The car's registered to Donald W. Thayer, 332 Bayview. Lieutenant, would you take this man to the station and interrogate him? Advise him of his rights, then see if you can get him to talk about it."

"I don't have anything to talk about," Scott said. "I'm just a hard-luck bum. Nothing ever goes right for me."

"I'll go talk to Donald Thayer," Gardner said.

"I find a wallet and think I'm in luck," Scott said. "Then what happens? I wind up over my ears in trouble."

Gardner, wheeling his car around, called, "Have this parking lot roped off. I've already found the bullet. See what else you can find."

He drove down to Bayview, about a mile from State and Parkway, a pleasant middle-class street. All the houses were dark. The

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Thayer house was a neat one-story frame structure with a tile roof. Gardner rang twice and finally a light went on inside, then the front door opened.

Thayer was short and plump, with thick eyeglasses. He wore pajamas, a robe, and slippers. "Oh. I thought you were my wife."

"I'm Sergeant Gardner. Can I come in?"

"What is it? Is it about my wife?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is it?" Thayer's eyes were round and bright behind his glasses.

"I'm afraid—"

"Go on, tell me. Is she dead?"

"Yes, sir."

Theyer turned away, and walked to the other side of the small nicely furnished living room. "I knew when I first saw you there." He turned back. His face looked frozen. "Accident?"

"No, I'm afraid she was shot to death."

"My God."

"We found her in the car, parked in the Olympic Theatre lot."

"Yes, she wanted to see the Burtons tonight. I don't like the Burtons. I used to like Elizabeth Taylor when she was younger, but . . ." He put his hand to his head. "What am I talking about? I'm not making any sense. What time is it, Sergeant?"

Gardner looked at his watch. "Two o'clock."

"I was asleep. Went to bed about eleven. When the bell rang and I saw she wasn't in bed, I thought it was her . . . Who could have done it? Why?"

"We've picked up a man, apparently a tramp. He had her wallet in his pocket."

"You mean somebody killed Ellen for the few dollars she had in her wallet?"

"It happens all the time."

"I know, I know, but—only in the papers. Not to your own wife."

Gardner shook his head sympathetically.

Thayer said, "I'm going to have a drink." He moved out of the room toward the kitchen. "You want one?"

"No. What time did she leave the house this evening?"

"About eight."

"You were alone after that?"

"Yes. I watched TV until eleven, then went to bed." Thayer came back with a drink in his hand. He held out his other hand, and stared at it. "Look at that. Steady. Steady as a rock. I can't believe it. It hasn't hit me yet."

Gardner watched him take half the drink down with a jerk of his head. Then Gardner said, "Do you have children?"

"A daughter Peggy, at a college up in Oregon. She's away on a skiing week-end—thank God for that. I won't be able to reach her until Monday."

"Do you own this home?"

"Yes, for eight years."

"What's your occupation, sir?"

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"I'm an accountant. With United Gas, in San Francisco. I've been with them for twenty-six years."

"Do you own a gun?"

"What was that?"

Gardner repeated it.

"What does that mean?" Thayer's voice was flat.

Gardner said, "I have to ask certain questions."

"I thought you said you had the killer."

"We have a suspect, sir."

"You have a bum with her purse in his pocket. What else do you need?"

"*Do* you own a gun, Mr. Thayer?"

"I don't own a gun, no. And I resent the question." Thayer finished his drink. "I'll get dressed and come with you. I want to see my wife."

The Thayer car was still on the lot, with the body in it. A police car was there, and an ambulance. The coroner's man had arrived. He stepped aside for Thayer to view the body. Tears welled in Thayer's eyes.

He straightened, and stared at Gardner. His eyes were strange. "I want to see the man who did this."

"The suspect is at the station now."

"I want to see him."

Gardner said quietly, "I don't think it would be a good idea, Mr. Thayer."

"What are you protecting him for?"

"That's not what I'm doing.

"I want to see that murdering bum. I want to see a man who'll kill a woman for eight dollars in her wallet."

"Eight dollars?" said Gardner.

"Or whatever was in there."

Gardner took the wallet from his pocket, unsnapped it, and after a moment said, "Eight one-dollar bills —and thirty cents in change." He looked at Thayer.

Thayer nodded. "That would figure."

"What do you mean?"

"She asked for money to go to the show. All I had was a ten. I know the ticket here costs a dollar and a half."

"I see."

Thayer stared at him. He gave a short hard laugh. "Did you think I'd looked in the wallet and counted the money after she was dead?"

Gardner said, "I don't think anything. I'm just conducting an investigation."

"Yeah. You have the murderer and yet you're riding me. Why?"

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

"I suppose being the husband I'm an automatic suspect, hey? You think I sneaked out here, walked a mile out here and waited for her in the car, then sneaked back home? You think that's the way it was?"

"Take it easy," Gardner said gently.

"For the insurance, maybe, hey? Maybe that's why I did it."

"Is there insurance?"

"Sure there's insurance. Twenty thousand dollars." He laughed rag-

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gedly. "Why don't you put the cuffs on me?"

Gardner said, "Is there someone you can stay with tonight, Mr. Thayer?"

Suddenly Thayer began to tremble. He put his hands to his face and said weakly, "I'm sorry. Do I act like I'm cracking up?"

"You've had a bad shock."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be all right, Sergeant. I'm sorry I made a fool of myself."

"You didn't. Let me drive you home now. If you need a prescription—"

"I have sleeping pills at home. I'll be all right."

He paused to look back at his wife. His voice was thick with grief. "Poor Ellen. Poor Ellen."

At the station Lieutenant Woodruff sat behind the duty officer's desk and said, "Scott wouldn't crack at all."

"You didn't find the gun?"

"No. We searched all around the depot, up and down the track—nothing. Of course he could have left it anywhere around town. We know she was killed almost two hours before you called in."

"How so?"

"The picture let out at eleven thirty. There's an all-night doughnut shop around the corner, on State. The girl there said a gray-haired woman came in about eleven thirty, had coffee and a doughnut, twenty cents, mentioned she always waited for the parking lot to clear. Talked to the girl about the picture. It was Mrs. Thayer. She left about eleven forty."

"So when she got back to the parking lot, all the other cars were gone."

"Right. And it so happens that a long freight goes through at eleven forty-four. She was probably shot just at that time."

"Nobody heard the shot?"

"No. So if Scott was hiding in the back seat and waiting for her, he would have had almost two hours to get rid of the gun."

Gardner nodded. "What does he say he was doing between eleven thirty and midnight?"

"Sleeping in the bushes behind the depot."

"When did he arrive in town?"

"Took the bus up from San Francisco at eight, arrived about eight forty-five."

"Why did he come?"

"Says he knows a guy he wanted to borrow some money from. Thought he knew where the guy lived, walked all over town, couldn't find the place."

"That sounds pretty phony."

"Oh, sure. Can't remember the guy's name or anything about him—somebody named Lefty, he met him at Candlestick Park at a ball game . . . It would sound phony even if it was true. Guys like Scott never make much sense. But it seems much more likely that he came up to pull a robbery."

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"Has he ever been arrested before?"

"Yes, half a dozen times. Did two stretches for housebreaking, the last one in 1962. He got three years—strictly a small-time loser."

Gardner lit a cigarette, frowned at the glowing tip. "He denies he took the purse from the car?"

"Right. Says when he woke up, which was a few minutes before you spotted him, he walked around a little and saw it lying right out in the open, about twenty feet from the depot."

Gardner shook his head. "It doesn't sound likely that someone would murder the woman, then throw away the money."

"I pointed that out to him. I told him he'd better come up with something better than that. He sticks to it though. Like I say, he doesn't make much sense."

Gardner was quiet for a few moments. "There is one thing going for him, though. If he had two hours to get rid of the gun, he also had two hours to get rid of the wallet."

"You've got a point there. Why'd he keep it?" Woodruff shrugged. "I don't know. You can't really figure a guy like that."

Gardner said, "If it wasn't him, it has to be Thayer."

"Thayer?"

"Yeah. Thayer's the only one who would throw the wallet away, with the money in it. Figuring somebody would pick it up, get his fingerprints on the wallet, incriminate himself. I know, it sounds pretty much like a book—"

"It does. How could Thayer be sure anybody'd find it?"

"Maybe he saw Scott sleeping behind the bushes, figured he was a natural patsy."

Woodruff was regarding him with a raised eyebrow. Gardner shrugged, grinned slightly. "Okay. I'll grant it sounds kind of wacky. I'm just keeping an open mind."

"You're the boss," Woodruff said. "I think when you sort through everything, though, you're going to find that it's the man in the cell downstairs who's going to take the rap for this."

Gardner went downstairs. Scott was the only prisoner that night. He was sitting on his cot, smoking. Gardner said, "You could save a lot of trouble for everybody by just telling the truth."

"Wouldn't matter," Scott said in a lifeless voice. "You guys have me, so you're going to hang this on me." He shrugged. "That's all right. I'm used to it. I've been through it before."

"Just a man that everybody picks on, huh?" Gardner regarded the prisoner speculatively. "Do you own a gun?"

"No."

"Ever own one?"

"No."

"And you didn't find the wallet in the car?"

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"No. But you're going to hang this on me anyway."

"You've got to admit it fits like it was made for you."

"Sure, I admit it. I know the way the world works. What if I cop a plea?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what'll you do for me if I give you a confession?"

"Do you want to confess?"

"I'll give you a confession if you see I get second degree."

Gardner shook his head. "I couldn't make any deal with you. I wouldn't want to anyway. I'm still investigating."

Early the next morning he drove to San Francisco, in a plain car, to the working-class neighborhood where Scott lived. He talked to a landlady, some bartenders. He returned to Belle View and went down to the cells. "Okay, Scott. You still say you didn't own a gun?"

"Yeah."

"Your landlady says different."

"Does she?"

"Uh huh. She says you had a gun in your room. She told you to get rid of it."

Scott closed his eyes, then opened them. "I forgot all about it."

"Did you?"

"Yeah. You won't believe that, but it's true. I had a gun for about five days."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Hell, anybody can get hold of a gun."

"Okay, where did you get yours?"

"Bought it from a sailor in a bar for ten bucks. No bullets in it. I kept it in my bureau."

"Why did you buy it?"

"I don't know, I just bought it. Then she told me to get rid of it."

"Did you?"

"No. I put it in the closet. After all, I paid ten bucks for it. Then somebody swiped it."

"Who swiped it?"

"I don't know. Somebody in the rooming house must have come in and swiped it. I looked for it and it was gone."

"When was that?"

"Month or so ago."

"Was it a .32?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

"You don't know why you bought it, you don't know where it went, you don't even know what kind of gun you bought."

"It was just a gun. I don't know anything about guns."

Gardner went upstairs. He lit a cigarette. He sat there, smoking and frowning, telling Woodruff about Scott's gun.

Woodruff said, "Well, you have a lot on him. Proximity to the crime, motive, bad character, known to have possessed a gun, lied about it, evidence of the wallet—you've got a case, Sam."

"I suppose so."

"I went down and interviewed Thayer's neighbors. They all give him a good word. Stable, responsi-

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ble, no indication of any domestic problems. When you think about it, it has to be Scott."

"It has to be one or the other of them."

"Yeah, your point about the wallet is good—a third party never would have tossed the money away. Either Scott killed her and took the wallet, or Thayer killed her and tossed the wallet where Scott would find it. But come to think of it, that last part doesn't hold up too well."

Gardner said slowly, "I suppose not."

"You'd have to have Thayer sneaking out and walking a dozen or more blocks with the strong likelihood that a neighbor would have seen and recognized him. You'd have to have him sneaking into the parking lot and waiting in the car, and how about if his wife left the show and went directly to the parking lot without stopping for a doughnut? Then the lot would have been full of people and he couldn't have shot her. How would he know she'd go to the doughnut shop and wait until the lot was empty?"

"According to the girl in the doughnut shop, from what you told me, Mrs. Thayer made a habit of doing that."

"Well, that's true. But of course he couldn't be sure that this particular time . . . It sounds sort of out of character for him. But all right, suppose it was that way. He grabs the wallet, crosses the street, just happens to catch a glimpse of Scott asleep in the bushes, decides on the spur of the moment to frame him, drops the wallet . . . How could he know Scott would wake up in time? How could he know a policeman wouldn't come along and find the wallet first? In which case, just as you say, with the money in there, everything would point to Thayer himself. I just can't see him doing that."

"It doesn't sound likely. But—"

"Then he walks all the way back home. What does he do with the gun?"

"Same as Scott would do—hides it somewhere."

"Not at home."

"Oh, no. He'd get rid of it on the way back."

"The neighbors have never seen a gun, never heard him talk about one. Where would he get a gun?"

Gardner shrugged. "Like Scott says—getting a gun is no big problem."

"You really don't have anything at all against Thayer, Sam."

"I know I don't. And here's Scott, all ready and waiting, everything against him, and ready to cop a plea." He grinned faintly. "Why sweat it out, huh? It's all wrapped up, and everybody's happy. Everybody but Scott. But I just can't get it out of my head—Scott wouldn't keep that wallet in his pocket for two hours."

"He's a drunk. He's got mice running around in his head. You can't figure a guy like that."

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"And I'd like to find that gun. I'd like to have Scott's landlady identify it. I'd like to have him admit it was his. Then I'd know for sure. As it is —"

"Well, what?"

"Well, I just have questions in my mind, is all."

He spent the rest of the afternoon around State and Parkway, conducting a search for the gun and trying to trace Scott's movements the night before. Nobody in the neighborhood could identify Scott as having been around, either before or after the murder. Gardner had store clerks and bartenders call personnel who had been on duty the night before, but no information turned up.

Back at the station Gardner found Woodruff behind his desk, with Thayer standing in front of it. Thayer's plump face looked drawn; his eyes were bloodshot.

Thayer said, "Woodruff here says you're top man on this case."

"That's right."

"Are you ready to charge the man?"

Gardner lit a cigarette. "We haven't been able to find the gun yet."

"So what if you haven't?"

"It would just make it that much tighter if we had the gun."

"It doesn't need to be any tighter. He's the killer, isn't he?"

"Things point that way."

"I don't know what you're waiting for."

"We're waiting for the gun."

"Maybe you'll never find it. Maybe he threw it into a passing freight car or something. Somebody finds it a hundred miles from here and says nothing. You think of that?"

"That's possible," Gardner admitted.

"So what if you never find it?"

Gardner looked at him a moment. Then he turned away, and stood at the window, looking out. He said without turning, "Then we'd have to let him go."

He heard Thayer's sharp intake of breath. "What did you say?"

"Well, without the gun—"

He turned. Woodruff was looking at him, his eyes narrowed.

Thayer said to Woodruff, "Did you hear what he said?"

"Yes."

"Do you agree with that?"

"Sergeant Gardner is in charge."

"You mean if you don't find the gun you'll let him go?"

Gardner said, "I'm afraid we'll have to."

Thayer said, "I think you're out of your mind. You have a killer, and—say, what kind of police force is this?"

He stared at Gardner, who shrugged slightly and drew on his cigarette.

"I'll take it to the newspapers. I'll take it to the District Attorney. You can't get away with incompetence like that!" And he stormed out.

Woodruff said, "Why did you tell him that?"

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"A crazy notion. I just don't want to send Scott up without knowing for sure."

He put his hands on the desk, flat, and gazed at Woodruff. "I'm probably dead wrong. Nothing will happen. But—I just have to give it a chance to happen."

Woodruff shook his head. "You play a hunch all the way, don't you? I don't know if I'd do as much for a no-good jerk like Scott."

Gardner shook his head. "It's not Scott. It's just that if we have power over people like Scott, I sure in hell don't want other people using it and making fools out of us."

They sat in Woodruff's car, a block from Thayer's house. It was almost one o'clock in the morning.

Woodruff yawned. "I don't think anything's going to happen."

Gardner said, "It was just a shot in the dark."

"We've been here since nine. How long do you figure to wait?"

"Let's wait another hour." He hungered for a cigarette, but tried to keep his mind off it.

They sat in silence. Woodruff dozed.

Gardner said finally, "It's two twenty. I guess it's a washout."

Woodruff rolled his shoulders and clenched his fists, yawning, ready to call it a night. He reached for the ignition switch.

Gardner said softly, "Hold it."

They sat still, watching. A shadow separated itself from the hedge by Thayer's house. It passed under the light on the corner—the figure of a man, dressed in dark pants, jacket, and hat.

Gardner opened the door when the man was a vague blur moving away. Gardner was also dressed in dark jacket and pants, as was Woodruff. Gardner said, "Let's go."

On crepe-soled shoes they moved along the sidewalk, across the street from the man, keeping his silhouette in sight.

They went six blocks through the sleeping residential section. Then they saw him turn.

"He's not going to the depot."

Gardner said softly, "No, he's turning right. Towards the park. Let's hurry it up."

They moved swiftly to the corner, getting there just in time to see the dark shape crossing the grass into the municipal park.

Woodruff muttered, "Dark over there. We could lose him . . . You see him?"

"Yeah. Near the tennis court. He's stopped, he's bending over. His back's to us. Let's go."

They glided over the moist grass. As they approached they could hear the man breathing hard. They saw him crouched, digging with his hands under a bush. They came up within ten feet.

Suddenly he straightened up and whirled.

Gardner shouted, "Hold it, Thayer!" His gun was out.

The man crouched again. For

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a second Gardner wondered. The face was without glasses, there was a smear of black under the nose—it looked like someone else. Then he realized it must be a false mustache. Thayer must have worn it last night when he hurried through the dark streets on his way to his wife.

The shape of a gun showed in Thayer's hand.

"Drop it," Gardner said.

"No," Thayer said.

"Come on, you've had it," Woodruff said sharply. "We followed you from your house. We know you planned to put that gun where it could be found. Now drop it and raise your hands."

"No," Thayer said.

"We'll cut you down."

"I don't care. I don't care what you do. You're not going to take me. Oh, what can I say to Jennie!"

"Don't be a fool," Gardner said.

Thayer said, "What a mess it all is. I'm glad to be finished with it."

He raised the gun to his head and squeezed the trigger.

They walked up to him, then stared down at him.

"Bad news for a girl named Jennie," said Woodruff. "Good news for a man named Scott. Who'll eventually wind up in the morgue or in prison anyway."

Gardner nodded. "Sure. You're right. I just hate to have a man try to make a fool out of me."

"You're too sensitive, Sam."

Gardner laughed raggedly. "Yeah. Well, you get that way, when you're black."

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THE AMBIGUITIES OF LO YEING PAI

by GERALD KERSH

NO OFFENSE TO THOSE WHO worship the worshipful—the speculation simply thrust itself into my mind: If Winston Churchill said of General Montgomery that he was "in defence invulnerable, in attack invincible, in victory intolerable," what would he have had to say about Mr. Vara, the Demon Tailor of Columbus Avenue?

He had given the salesman fair warning: "My friend, what I don't want I've already got, and what I do want I can't afford; so good day to you!"

But the intruder pressed forward inexorably, with his big black bag, under the cover of a terrible barrage of high-explosive anecdotes and harassing, enfilading fires of small talk. Vara fell back on his base, to the left of the iron stove. At a certain moment, when all seemed lost, he rallied and counterattacked. With a helpless-looking shrug, he said, "Well, sit in the cubicle a minute while I press out your suit a little."

Before the salesman knew it, his trousers were in Vara's hands, and the intruder was cut off, nailed to the ground, surrounded. Vara, stony-faced, half smiling, his gray eyes glinting under knitted brows, bone-dry in the swirling smoke and drifting steam—all Vara needed was a black beret and two badges, as he said, "You invaded my shop to please yourself. Now you shall stay to please me."

The salesman said, "Come on, gimme back my pants, will you?"

"Make me nervous and I might burn the seat out of them."

It was *shrecklichkeit*. The man in the cubicle cried, "Give a guy a break!"

"What mercy did you show me?"

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asked Vara. Turning to me, he said, "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, but you see how it is. If it's not one thing it's another. 'Give me a break, mister—save my life—take a subscription to *The Gentlewoman's Evening Journal;* have your baby's woolen boots coated with bronze for two dollars seventy-five; give me a break, have your wedding photograph enlarged to life-size and colored in seven different colors; help me through college by taking a correspondence course on how to break horses and grow mushrooms in your cellar' . . . And now, if you please, this one here wants me to buy a neon sign!"

The salesman shouted, "Why not? Every businessman has a neon sign!"

"Oh, yes, I need a neon sign," said Vara. "When the wind is in the right direction, as far away as Central Park you can smell something like people being boiled in their clothes, and you say I should advertise Vara. Anyway, I've got one."

"Where?" asked the salesman.

"In the basement, in a box. Where else? I am told that it is a first-rate sign, as these things go. I've had it since 1937. It makes a glow in the sky when switched on. If you were passing five thousand feet overhead in an airplane you would see this orange-colored glow and you would know that here is where you go to have a button sewn on. Mrs. Vara bought it for me, for a present. She said—"

The salesman pleaded, "Have a heart, mister—I've got other calls to make."

"You should have thought of that an hour ago when I begged and prayed of you to please get the hell out of my shop . . . Mrs. Vara said, 'The time has come to expand or explode.' She had been listening to a lecture on Japanese Imperialism," said Vara, ignoring his prisoner and addressing me. "She said, 'Advertise!' I said to her, 'Advertise what? You remind me,' I said, 'of an occasion in Savile Row, London, when I was working for the great Schultz. It was just before we threw the Nizam of Hyderabad out of the establishment for contradicting us about the bias-cut of a heavy white shantung.

"'There came into Savile Row one morning a coalman leading a horse that was pulling a cart stacked twenty feet high with sacks, leaving a track of coal dust a yard wide. Both man and horse were covered an inch deep with tar and coal, and the man was shouting *Coal, Coal, Coal* in a voice to break windows with—a terrible voice.

"'As I came by, a policeman stopped him and said, "Hold your noise, can't you?" And the man said, "What noise? How the hell are people to know what I'm selling if I don't call out?" This,' I said to Mrs. Vara, 'is a case in point.'

"And I made it perfectly clear that a man like me could only be embarrassed by an electric sign. I

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told her to take a tape and measure the premises. I said, 'If I had as many as three customers at one time, two of them would have to make a line outside. Would you like me to put up a marquee while we're about it?' I said, 'Let us waste no more breath, my dear; my mind is made up—over my dead body you'll put up a sign in my shop!'

"Next day the sign was up in my window—a neon one, and of a color so frightful that it actually made a buzzing noise, a high-pitched buzzing noise! And it was so unbearably brilliant in itself that it made my premises totally invisible, if only because no human being could endure it at close range. Now I ask you, what does a peace-loving man do in a case like that?"

The question was a rhetorical one, but the salesman was into the opening like a desert fox. "You trade it in—we give a liberal allowance—for a Marvex No-Daz."

Ignoring him, Vara said, "In a case like that, a diplomatic family man considers ways and means of harmless sabotage. This infernal sign, in addition to blinding and deafening me, also roasted me, for it gave out a great heat. So I waited until it was at its hottest and then threw water over it."

"It could have burst, one of them old-fashioned signs," the salesman said.

"It did. It burst," said Vara. "But my relief was not long-lived, because Mrs. Vara had procured with it a replacement guarantee. Within twenty-four hours it was back, worse than ever. So I tried quietly working on its joints, which seemed to be stuck together with black tape, with a screwdriver."

"You could have electrocuted yourself, with one of those," said the salesman.

Vara said, "I did; and from that day forth I have been a firm opponent of capital punishment, American style. Hang a man, yes; guillotine a man, yes; and as for gas chambers, they leave me unmoved —living as I do in this shop. But that electric shock gave me a lot to think about for many a day, believe me."

"Now with a Marvex—"

Eying the salesman with grudging approval, Vara said, "One can't help admiring this man . . . I say, I alone was the sufferer. The sign developed a neuralgic kind of tic, which made it wink and flicker, but it remained quite as sturdy as before, and doubly offensive. So I bided my time. In the first place, Mrs. Vara was expecting an addition to our family. It is unwise to upset her at the best of times, but absolutely foolhardy to do so when she feels delicate. One must give and take, in marriage. Besides, she had taken a fancy to that sign and when she came uptown she liked to admire it from across the avenue.

"In the second place, it was April; the days were getting longer and in a little while I'd be closing the shop

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before lighting-up time. I would be able to switch the sign on, lock up, turn away, and go home, without giving the thing one unnecessary look. I leave a night light burning, anyway, I thought; so let the damned sign burn itself up."

"A Marvex is—"

"Please shut up. Let's have a cup of tea. *You* wouldn't appreciate this," said Vara to the salesman, "but this gentleman will." He handed me a lacquered tea caddy. "A very extra special Lapsang Souchong, I am told," he said, "with some kind of flowers in it which Mrs. Vara believes to be opium. She won't let me have it in the house—she thinks that everything Chinese is full of opium.

"There was quite a scene when I took this tea home. I said, 'A present from Mr. Lo Yeing Pai.' He is an old friend of mine. She said, 'I knew it all along. This was all I was short of. Opium! Get out of my sight, you Fu Manchu, you! A Broken Blossom he wants to make of me, the Generalissimo! Take it away, you Chu Chin Chow, you! A proper little Genghis Khan he turned out to be, the shrimp . . .' et cetera, et cetera. I didn't dare to give her the tortoiseshell-and-ivory backscratcher—that would have been the last straw, let alone the pot of pickled lichees. So let's have a cup . . ."

"*Please,* mister, a joke's a joke—" the salesman began.

"Oh, you want your clothes, do you?" said Vara, with a malicious grin. "Calm. A cup of tea induces calm. I can chat for hours and hours over a cup of tea. Would you like a fortune cookie? Where was I? Oh, yes, Mr. Lo Yeing Pai—philosophy—signs, et cetera. Mr. Lo liked signs—signs and omens, for although he was a very intelligent man he was quite superstitious. This, I daresay, was because he was an inveterate gambler, like so many Chinese. It is not a vice peculiar to Chinese people. All poor people are gamblers; all gamblers believe in luck; so poor people in general are superstitious.

"That," said Vara, with some complacency, "is a syllogism. Mr. Lo and I used to have long philosophical talks about it. He was something of a philosopher and I don't mean 'Confucius say—' and all that nonsense, in spite of the fact that Mr. Lo was the spitting image of Charlie Chan as played by Warner Oland. The Chinese used to love Charlie Chan because they found him wryly comical—in China, he was believed to be a humorous portrait of a typical American policeman. Mr. Lo didn't mind cultivating the resemblance. It even pleased him to be called Charlie.

"He had fourteen suits, all identical, of superfine black broadcloth, which I looked after for him, and he wore only silk shirts—by which you may guess that he was in a solid way of business. He and his partner, Han Sing, had a store four

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blocks up the avenue—mysterious Oriental novelties, wholesale—backscratchers, dinner gongs, Buddhas, joss sticks, chopsticks, dragons, teeny little ashtrays, soapstone statues—you know the kind of thing.

"Who wants them is the only mystery. Backscratchers, for example—has anybody ever seen anyone *using* a backscratcher? Yet they sell by the million. Perhaps they get worn out passing from hand to hand, since no sooner does anybody get one than he gives it away.

"Anyway, Mr. Lo and Mr. Han made a lot of money, and lived decent regular lives. No opium, no dancing girls—Mrs. Lo, who was the exact opposite of Luise Rainer in *The Good Earth,* would have had something to say about that—no trap doors, no nothing. Their only employee was a withered little bookkeeper, one Washington Foong Soh—not even a flower-faced girl in satin trousers.

"You couldn't imagine a more respectable pair of tradesmen. Even in their little dissipations they were quiet and inoffensive. It was like this: every week, generally on a Thursday, Mr. Lo, as the younger and more active of the two, went downtown to the docks to meet a boat and check in a consignment of goods from abroad, which came in, more often than not, very late at night. So on Thursday evenings Lo and Han had an amiable sort of stag party.

"They would close the shop at six o'clock and go uptown to their favorite restaurant for a long-drawn-out Chinese dinner of goodness-knows-how-many courses. After dinner they would return to Columbus Avenue, go into the comfortable little parlor—for Han, being a bachelor, lived on the premises—and they would open a bottle of arrack, and sit down to play cards. That was all there was to it.

"The game they played was some abstruse form of stud poker, with twelve cards, and an unbelievably complicated system of drawing and betting. Mr. Lo tried to explain it to me once, but I couldn't grasp it. He told me that only good friends should play that game for money—and there was no point in playing it for love—because it admitted of about seventy-five different ways of cheating, all of which was part of the fun of the game.

"What was more, he explained, if you played only for pennies even, the raising and betting went in such a manner that you could lose a hundred dollars in a quarter of an hour. And Lo and Han played for quarters, and from nine o'clock until sometimes three in the morning!

"I once said to him, 'But surely, my dear sir, such a game must be sheer murder?'

"He said, 'Oh, yes. It is nothing for one of us to lose fifty or sixty thousand dollars at one sitting.' I said, 'How can you afford it?' He laughed, and said, 'Why, you see, we understand each other so perfectly

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well, and are so evenly matched, that it almost invariably comes down to the plain run of the cards. At the end of the year Han might be a thousand dollars ahead, or I might be a thousand dollars ahead of him—nothing more. It is a fake, really. We have all the excitement of playing for huge stakes, and only a fraction of the risk. Last year, for example, eight hundred thousand dollars "changed hands" between us, and I ended three hundred and fifty dollars and fifty cents down. The year before that we played for a million, and I won nine hundred. This year—but the year is young—I am losing, to date—' he looked it up in a little notebook—'one hundred and eighty-seven thousand, seven hundred and five dollars and twenty-five cents. It is great fun. We are very solemn about it. Han takes out his lucky mascot and invokes it. I twist my lucky ring around on my finger and call on it to stand by me. Then we go to it, serious as owls.'

"I said, 'It would be too rich for my blood. Once, when I won twenty-three dollars on a horse, I jumped so high with joy that I sprained my ankle coming down. And when I have a touch of fever I have nightmares about what happened to me when I lost it back again, and the names Mrs. Vara called me—Nick the Greek and Monsieur Zographos and Lord Sandwich and The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo . . . Well, good luck come Thursday, Mr. Lo.'

"He turned the so-called lucky ring round and round on the little finger of his left hand and went on his way.

"But that Thursday night he had very bad luck indeed. If it were a laughing matter I should be tempted to say that at dinner Mr. Lo's chow assumed a sinister mien, because he came away with indigestion. To palliate it, he drank more arrack than he was accustomed to, and this gave him a headache. The headache caused him to play badly so that he lost and lost until, at half-past one, he threw down his cards and with appropriate apologies said he'd play no more that night.

"Then he walked very leisurely in the open air for an hour or so, to clear his head, but got caught in a spring rainstorm and was soaked to the skin. He arrived at the docks in good time, but the boat was late. When it did arrive, Mr. Lo had some bother with the Customs, and had to pay excess duty on some manufactured articles or other.

"He arrived home at nine o'clock on the Friday morning, and went straight to bed with hot tea and aspirin tablets. But just as he was relaxing and breaking out into a gentle perspiration, the police arrived and said they were glad to see him there because they wanted him rather badly; and would he kindly put on his pants and come along?

"Naturally, Mr. Lo asked, 'What's the matter?' The police said, in effect, 'Nothing that a jolt of elec-

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tricity won't iron out, Mr. Lo. You murdered your partner, Mr. Han Sing, you know; but if you cop a plea, the District Attorney will no doubt so arrange it that you get away with life imprisonment.'

"Lo was horrified. 'Who would murder Han Sing?' he asked. 'You,' the police replied. 'You were practically seen doing the job. Anyway, we aren't charging you just yet; we just insist that you come along and make a statement concerning your movements last night.' So Lo Yeing Pai was taken away, while Mrs. Lo, with an inscrutable look, drew—"

"—a Chinese dagger out of her sleeve!" cried the salesman, interested in spite of himself.

"A thousand dollars out of the bank," said Vara, "and took it to Mr. Lo's lawyer who, going into the matter forthwith, found that things did indeed look black for my friend her husband. The facts were as follows:

"Two decent, sober, and industrious young brothers named Mahaffey, who lived in the Bronx, having attended a fund-raising party for Free Ireland at Fingal's Restaurant on Columbus Avenue somewhere in the Eighties, were on their way home. The time was about half-past two in the morning. They were making their way to a subway station on Broadway.

"As they walked they dawdled—it was scarcely worthwhile their hurrying to go to bed—commenting on the funny names some people have, who own businesses in uptown Manhattan—like Rappaport, Van der Beek, Gwinnett, Sardikichi Sato, Disselboom, Trattoria, and so forth—and expressing a natural fear that one day the country would be so entirely given over to foreigners that an immigrant would have to emigrate before he got his first papers.

"I mention all this for a specific purpose, as you will see—they were looking at shopkeepers' names, I repeat. After a while the younger of the brothers said, 'And will you look at that one, then!' And he pointed out the neon sign that burned perpetually in the window of Mr. Lo's shop. It read: LO YEING PAI, and under Lo's name, HAN SING. And even as the boys marveled at this bit of cosmopolitanism, who should come out of the side door but no less a person than Charlie Chan himself—or Charlie Chan's double—in a round black hat and a long black raincoat, smoking a cigarette in an ivory holder! He looked left and right, and then, furtively ducking his head, ran off in the direction of Broadway by way of a cross-street.

"The Mahaffey brothers walked a little farther, exchanging light comments of no importance. Then, a patrolman coming by, they checked on the whereabouts of the subway—they being strangers in this part of the town—and the policeman being a man named O'Halloran, they swapped a few civilities.

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The elder Mahaffey mentioned that he had just seen Charlie Chan himself coming out of the Chinese-sounding shop across the way.

"The officer said, 'Oh, he'll be Mr. Charlie Lo, and a very nice sort of man.' I daresay he added a few 'At-all-at-alls,' and here or there a 'Be-gob-and-begorrah'—I have never heard any such expressions in actual use, but fifty thousand comedians can't be wrong.

"The brothers Mahaffey continued on their way, and O'Halloran proceeded on his beat. His beat eventually took him to the door of Lo Yeing Pai's and Han Sing's establishment. He gave that door a perfunctory push, and found it unlocked. This was irregular in general, and in particular because the partners had installed a new and noisy burglar alarm.

"So the policeman went in, and he found poor old Han Sing dead in the parlor, his head beaten in with a stone doorstop carved in the shape of a lion, and sprawled in a mess of scattered cards. In his pocket was a note of hand whereby his partner Lo Yeing Pai acknowledged a debt of some two hundred and sixty thousand dollars. So there was motive, weapon, and also opportunity, for a number of people remembered having seen the two Chinese shopkeepers returning to their place of business at nine that evening, as they did every Thursday evening.

"Now it so happened that I was away from this shop on that weekend. Mrs. Vara was presenting me with a daughter at that time, and although I knew there was nothing I could possibly do to assist further in this affair, still . . . Mrs. Vara and I may not see eye to eye about everything in the world, but let a crisis occur and one or the other of us is sure to be within shouting distance. All went well, I am glad to say. So I first heard about the murder on the following Monday.

"Questioned, Mr. Lo became nervous. You see, he didn't hope to be believed. He made too much of what he had been brought up to think of as Occidental insularity and pragmatism. Little did he know —Americanized though he was— that we of the West, who survive from joke to joke, live by such a cockeyed metaphysics as the East never even dreamed of!

"Anyway, his statement didn't ring true, quite apart from the fact that he put a very weak face on it. Did he owe Han over a quarter of a million? Well, yes—that is to say, no—he did, and he didn't. Had he sat down to play cards with Han at nine in the evening? Yes. Had they quarreled? Lo said yes, of course; they invariably quarreled when they played cards; it was part of the game to quarrel. Suspicion of cheating, perhaps? No suspicion of anything; he and Han were friends. They never suspected each other; only enemies suspect each other. Only enemies dare not quarrel.

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"'What is it you want of me?' he asked them. 'I have nothing to hide. I was playing badly, so I stopped playing. I went out. I walked downtown, slowly, smoking cigarettes, until I realized that I had left my good-luck ring behind me. Before I left I washed my hands. Before I washed I took off my ring. It is not a valuable ring—a bit of white jade, unimportant—but I am superstitious about it. So I went back, having plenty of time. I remembered having left it in the soap dish. But when I got to Columbus, at 75th Street, it occurred to me that Han Sing would, most likely, have gone to bed. I had my key to the store, of course; but still I didn't want to disturb him. I looked at my watch, and it was twenty minutes to three. I decided I had better ride back downtown in a taxi. Then it started to rain, and so, still having time to spare, I stepped into a doorway for shelter.'

"They wanted to know what happened then. He answered, 'Why, nothing. There was a shower. I smoked a cigarette and waited. The rain stopped. I hurried towards Broadway, where there is always more chance of picking up a cab.' 'You were alone?' they asked him. 'Certainly.'

"Then they said, 'Two sober and responsible witnesses saw you coming out of your own shop at about a quarter to three, and mentioned the matter to the patrolman on duty there.' Mr. Lo said, 'If my enemies want to swear my life away, I cannot help it.' And he would say no more.

"I said to the detective whose trousers I was pressing, and who told me about it, 'There is something here that is several degrees less than kosher. I smell a rat.'

"He said, 'Ah, Mr. Vara, there's no getting to the bottom of the Oriental mind. They're devious, deep, tortuous.'

"'Tortuous your granny!' I said to him. 'Get that idea out of your head. You can't understand the Chinese because they're so incredibly simple, that's the trouble. They had printing for ten thousand years, and never put out a newspaper. They had gunpowder for ten thousand years, and never made anything worse than a firecracker. They had philosophy for ten thousand years, and never got half as tortuous and devious as Swedenborg. I daresay you have read Swedenborg,' I said. He had not; neither had I; but no matter.

"I said, 'I believe Lo to be an honest man, and I don't believe he's lying.' The detective said, 'So are the Mahaffey boys—they'd starve before they lied.'

"I said, 'They could be mistaken.' 'Nothing's altogether impossible, I guess,' said the detective, 'but tell me, how many Chinese shops owned by Lo Yeing Pai and Han Sing are there in these five or six blocks? The boys told the cop, O'Halloran; O'Halloran found Han Sing, his body still warm; Lo

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Yeing Pai was positively identified —his story simply doesn't stand up, it's unsupported, it doesn't even ring true. What more do you want?'

"I said, 'I don't know. I want *something* more. The facts, as you call them, are at war with my instincts; I simply can't swallow them. I don't think Lo Yeing Pai *could* have killed his friend.'

"The detective asked what Mr. Lo was to me, anyway. I replied, 'A customer, nothing more, but that's neither here nor there: Schultz and I have thrown royalty out of our shop on a matter of principle, and this is a matter of principle.'

"The detective laughed coarsely, and said, 'What you keep on telling me, chucking people out—were you in a wrestling ring, or something?' I said, 'Speaking of rings, did you find Mr. Lo's jade ring where he said he left it?' 'Yes, in the soap dish.' 'And did you find poor Han Sing's little bunch of golden slugs?'

"I explained to the detective that each partner had his lucky charm. Lo's was a jade ring. Han's was a small bunch of little cubical slugs of virgin gold, stamped with an old Imperial mark; they used to be a kind of special royal currency in Peking, long ago. Han had six of them on a gold cord—he was forever toying with them, twirling them around his finger, throwing them from hand to hand, and so forth.

"The detective said, 'No, nothing like that turned up.' I warned him, 'That might be important.'

"When he was gone, it being lunchtime and there not being much to do in the shop, I went out for a breath of air and a glass of beer—or, more properly, since I went to Magruder's Saloon on the corner, a breath of beer and a glass of air. Magruder called his hole-in-the-wall The Shamrock Grill.

"When I got there he was having trouble with his bright green electric sign, according to which his house was now called The Sham. I watched the operations of the electrician, while Magruder called alternately on the Devil who, he said, was the begetter of electric signs, and on Saint Jude, the patron saint of hopeless cases.

"I slapped myself on the forehead and cried, 'Got it!' so that Magruder growled that whatever it was that had bitten me, I must have brought it in myself. But I said, 'Give everybody in the bar a drink on me.' 'There's nobody here but yourself,' said Magruder, and I said, 'I know that—do you take me for a complete fool? Have one yourself, and when that workman is done, send him over to my place.' 'Your sign need fixing too?' Magruder asked. And he never spoke a truer word!

"I hurried to the telephone and called Mr. Lo's lawyer, Claude 'Contingency Clause' Cohen, and told him to come over at once because I had news for him. He turned

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up, and I said, 'Mr. Lo is innocent.' He said, 'Everybody is innocent until proved guilty, but my clients are more innocent than most. What have you got?'

" 'First,' I said, 'please confirm what I think—that the case against my friend Lo Yeing Pai rests on the testimony of those two boys who saw him coming out of his own store at half-past two o'clock or so that Thursday morning.'

"Cohen said, 'Quite right; and it doesn't look like there's any way of persuading them, or O'Halloran, that they might have been mistaken. If only Lo could be the same size as other Chinese! But no, he's got to be taller and weigh two hundred and twenty pounds. Generally, you can trip a witness in cases of this sort on the grounds that to a non-Oriental person all Chinese and Japanese look alike. But Lo's too conspicuous. It's troublesome, troublesome. But come on, what's on your mind?'

" 'But what if the brothers Mahaffey were four blocks away at the time?' I asked him. He said, 'Well, then the case against Lo would go *phut!*'

" 'Step across the street with me for a moment,' I begged him. 'The weather is clouding over. Let me first switch on my sign.'

He shrugged and followed me over the Avenue to the Spanish grocery store that used to be just opposite here. 'You know that Lo Yeing Pai's and poor Han Sing's establishment is some distance away?' I said. He said, 'I know perfectly well where it is. Make it snappy, whatever it is—I'm a very busy . . . Hey!'

"His eye was following my pointing finger, and he was looking right into the window of this self-same shop in which we now sit—this identical private non-profit-making enterprise into which every Tom, Dick, and Harry with a sample case and a line of salestalk feels he has a right to intrude with his 'Gimme a break' and his 'Have a heart'!

"And looking, Claude 'Contingency Clause' Cohen, before whom all District Attorneys tremble, now that I have made his reputation for him, cried, 'Hey!' and 'Utterly incredible!' and fell on my neck.

"I said to him, 'Now all we need do is, retrace the Mahaffey brothers' itinerary from Fingal's Restaurant, checking with a photographer—but who am I to teach you your business?' And Cohen said, 'You have already taught me my business, Mr. Vara. If only you'd been through law school I'd make you a partner.'

"I said, 'Oh, yes, I can just hear Mrs. Vara on that subject: Erle Stanley Vara, Perry Shrimp, et cetera; and "Come on, Dashiell, tear up my nightgown and kick me in the face," and "The meat loaf isn't good enough for Nero Vara—bake him a couple orchids." No, I thank you, Mr. Cohen; as I am, so let me be.'

"And we went together to Lo's place, and he refreshed his memory of the outside of the shop, with its

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sign that said, in a roughly vertical Chinese style:

LO
YEING
PAI

HAN
SING

"And 'Oh, *brother!*' was all Claude Cohen could say when we parted.

"So. That same night, at about ten o'clock, the Mahaffey brothers were walked along from Fingal's—retracing their way as of the night of the murder—and at a certain point they said, 'There's the place.' 'Are you sure?' they were asked. 'Positive!'

" 'You are positive that it was from out of that doorway you saw the gentleman coming, the Chinese gentleman who, as you informed Patrolman O'Halloran, looked like Charlie Chan?' 'Sure as can be, the one we identified, we take our oath!'

"They were told, 'But this is not the place where the murder occurred.'

"The Mahaffeys replied that they knew nothing about any murder at that time, and cared less; and if they'd known there'd be all this to-do about harmlessly remarking on somebody's looking like a character out of a movie they'd have kept their mouths shut when they talked to a copper. They were informed that the sign they were now looking at belonged to one Mr. Vara, and was on the blink, out of order, ill-connected. In the daytime this sign said:

TAILOR
DYEING
REPAIRS

HAND
PRESSING

"But remember the neuralgic tic the sign had developed, the winking and flickering? Well, finally some of the letters had stopped fluttering and blacked out. So at night all the neon sign showed was:

LO
YEING
PAI

HAN
SING

"And so the case against Lo Yeing Pai broke down—a simple matter of observing the Oriental ambiguities of an Occidental neon sign," and Vara handed the salesman his freshly pressed pants.

He, dressing, said, "*Somebody* must have killed that Han Sing."

Vara said, "Naturally. As I suspected, it was Washington Foong Soh, the bookkeeper. At six that evening, when his employers, who were at the back of the shop, thought he had let himself out after saying good night, Washington Foong Soh slammed the door but stayed inside. He hid behind a screen. He, too, was a gambler; but

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a desperate one, and in debt around Mulberry Street.

"He had heard Lo and Han mentioning the huge sums that supposedly changed hands every Thursday night, and made up his mind to rob Han Sing after Lo had gone. The old man heard him, and so Foong knocked him down with that stone lion. He said he didn't mean to kill old Han, and since he confessed right away he only got fifteen years or so.

"My instincts apart, I knew Lo couldn't have done it when I heard that Han's lucky mascot was missing—Lo Yeing Pai would never have stolen a thing like that; but the likes of Washington Foong couldn't have resisted it.

"The police collared him when he tried to pawn it at a place on Sixth Avenue—seven ounces of virgin gold, worth more than the cash he took after he killed Han."

The salesman asked, "How much was that?"

"A hundred and forty dollars in cash. Then again, there was the circumstance of the burglar alarm being switched off, and the shop door left open. A businessman, instinctively, would close his own shop door. But I don't know why I waste my time telling you all these things. As I was saying, before I was interrupted, I don't want a neon sign; I've got a neon sign; neon signs are ambiguous, unreliable, and misleading—"

"But a Marv—" A certain glint in Vara's eye stopped the salesman in mid-word. "Okay, I'm going," he said.

The door closed behind him, and Vara, composing his face into its customary expression of pity and pain, began in a hushed voice to tell me that my fine old whipcord trousers were so full of lesions as to be beyond mortal aid, and that I must brace myself for the worst and buy a new pair. Which I gladly did—Vara's story was worth it.

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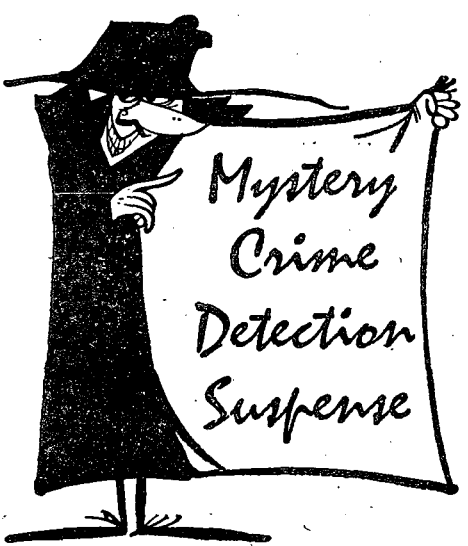

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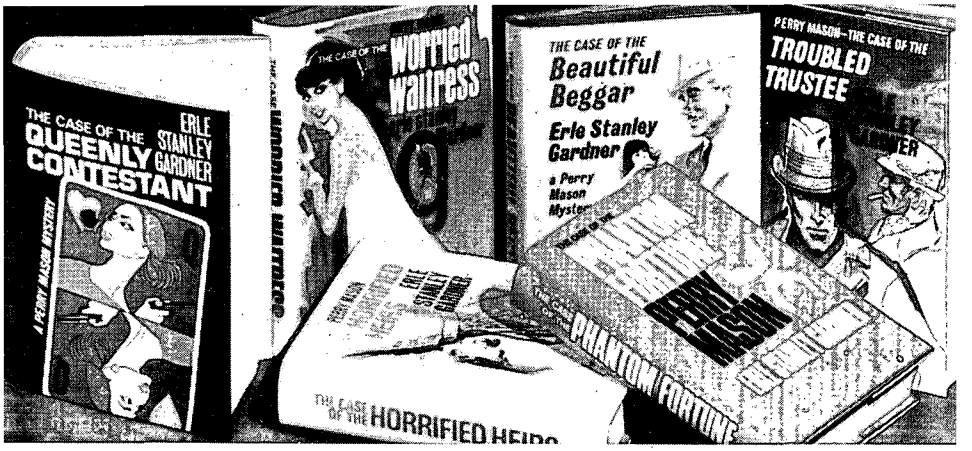
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